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RED LIGHTNING, THE MAN OF CHANCE; Or, FLUSH TIMES IN GOLDEN GULCH.

A Companion Story to "The Kid Glove Miner," and a Romance of Adventure and Mystery in Borderland.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "FREELANCE, THE BUCCANEER," "WILD BILL, THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT," "WILD BILL'S GOLD TRAIL," ETC. ETC.



A FEW MORE STROKES OF THE SHARP AX, AND THEN CAME THE SNAPPING, TEARING SOUND, MINGLED WITH THE CURSES
AND PRAYERS OF THE DOOMED WRETCHES.

Red Lightning,

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CHAPTER I. THE SEVEN STARS.

A GROUP of horsemen were dashing along a trail in Borderland.

Now they skurried across a valley, then along the mountain-side, and again dashed through some dark canyon, riding the while at a pace that showed that they were being pursued by foes, or were pursuing some fugitive.

There were nine men in the party, and they rode in single file, excepting the two in front, and they were side by side.

At length one of the two leaders said in a low tone to his companion:

"I will not trust them with our secret."

"Do you not think that Bender is true?" asked the other in the same low tone.

"Yes, he may be; but some of his men may prove treacherous, for remember, there is a large price upon my head."

"And mine."

"True, so we cannot be too careful."

"I think you are right; but how can you get rid of them?"

"I will show you," and after a few moments more the last speaker called out:

"Halt!"

The horses were reined back, and all remained at a stand-still, while one of the leaders said:

"Bender, as you know, the Echo Gap is just ahead, and there it is we will have to make our stand against our foes, for I am confident that our enemies will pursue us."

"Yes, pard," answered the man addressed as Bender.

"Well, to stand them off we have got to meet them at the Gap, and they cannot drive us back then, while to flank us, they will have to ride forty miles and come in at the other end of the Gap, for I know that they are not aware of a secret way out."

"Is that a secret way out o' the Gap, pard?"

"Yes, Bender, there are several of them."

"I am glad o' that, fer I hates ter be cooped up."

"Now, Black Bill and myself will ride in to my Retreat, get our men together, and return here by sunrise to help you defend the Gap."

"Yas, pard."

"And I wish you to remain here with your men until our return."

"You can go into camp in the canyon, and if you are pressed worse than we expect, beat them back, and the first shot will bring us to your aid."

"All right, pard."

"And you'll be back by sun-up?"

"Not before?"

"No, there is no need of it."

"Waal, we'll hold the Gap."

"Good, so now we will leave you. Come, Black Bill."

The man addressed by the appellation of Black Bill made no reply, but rode to the side of his comrade, and the two started off at a gallop.

Those whom they left behind then rode slowly on to a deep canyon, known as Echo Gap, and there they came to a halt, and the men began to dismount, when the voice of their leader caused them to pause.

"Pards, we hes a leetle time ter do a stroke o' biz fer ourselves," he said.

"Waal, Bender, what are it?" asked one.

"Them two Bills is high-flyers, an' no mistake, an' now we hes had ter dig out o' Golden Gulch, it are good ter hev the'r protection."

"But they hes a gang o' men up at thar retreat, an' ef we goes on a raid, as I hes in mind, it are a big divvy with them along."

"So I says let's go now."

"Whar, pard?"

"Up ter the Elgin cabin an' mine."

"Whar?" and several asked the question in seeming amazement.

"Up ter the mine what the Kid Glove Miner won at a game o' keerds."

"It are haunted, Boss."

"Waal, we bain't afeerd."

"They says that the ghosts o' poor Ed Elgin an' his Angel goes prowlin' about thar every night," said one in a tone of superstitious awe.

"The Kid Glove Miner stays thar, don't he?"

"Yas, Boss."

"And all alone too, don't he?"

"Yas, 'ceptin' the ghosts o' Elegant Ed an' his Angel."

"Durn ther ghosts, says I, fer I isn't afeerd of we goes tergether."

"What fer, Boss?"

"Fer dust, fer I hears it said that the Kid Glove Miner hev struck it rich, an' hes bags o' dust in his cabing."

"He are down at the Gulch, as we all knows, an' nobody are thar, so we kin jist sail in an' git plenty o' tin an' skip with it."

"Yer bet we kin, ef it is thar."

"Oh! it is thar, an' we kin git back to the Gap afore day, an' say nothin' ter Blonde Bill about hevin' been gone, an' we won't hev ter dervide thar dust with him an' Black Bill, an' t'others o' the Overland Tax-gatherers."

"I says go, Boss," cried one.

"And I hitches on," said another.

"Count me along," put in a third, and thus the leader won his way, and the band of seven men, known in Golden Gulch as the "Seven Stars," and suspected of all kinds of deviltry, rode off on the trail leading up into the mountains, bound upon a raid against a man's gold, which he had dug from out the generous earth, and which they, too idle to work, preferred to steal.

CHAPTER II. BLONDE BILL'S TREACHERY.

The two horsemen who had left the Seven Stars at the entrance to Echo Gap, rode on at a sweeping pace up the canyon, and in perfect silence, as far as conversation went, for the clatter of their hoof-falls alone broke the stillness of the night.

Their way led through a narrow gap, or canyon, upon either side of them towering the rocky and precipitous sides, the summits of which, three hundred feet above their heads, were fringed with a growth of mountain pine and cedars.

Here and there a slight break in the rocky wall was visible, and once or twice they found the entrance to a cavernous opening, but otherwise the gap seemed to have no break in its precipitous sides.

After a ride of several miles the canyon opened into a kind of plaza, the walls of which were just as precipitous and even more lofty, than back in the narrow passageway.

A clump of cedars grew upon the right side, and around them glimmered several camp-fires, showing that an encampment was near.

Into the thicket dashed the two horsemen, to suddenly draw rein before a large camp-fire, around which were seated and reclining half a dozen wild-looking men, who looked up quickly at the approach of the others and politely saluted.

"Men, we leave our camp within the hour, so get what booty you can together, and pack it upon the extra horses," ordered one of the two horsemen.

The men locked up with surprise, while one asked:

"You do not intend to desert the Retreat, do you, cap'n?"

"I do."

"You cannot find a safer one."

"I am the judge of that, Frank King, and, if you do not care to go with me say so," was the haughty response.

"Oh! I will go, for I believe in the Kentucky motto, as far as we are concerned, that 'united we stand, divided we fall,'" said the man who had been addressed as Blonde Bill.

The leader made no reply to the speaker, but turning to his companion of the ride to the camp, said:

"Black Bill, will you see to getting the band together and the packhorses ready?"

"Certainly, but do you really intend to leave this Retreat?"

"I do."

"It is safe as any we can find."

"It is not, as I know, and with the Kid Glove Miner and Doctor Frank Powell leading an attack against us, we could not hold the place two days, for those are not men we can put off."

"But where will you go?"

"Wait and see," was the laconic response.

"And Bender and his men at the entrance to the Gap?"

"What care I for them?"

"You will leave them?"

"Assuredly, for they would turn traitors for a small sum and the promise of their lives."

"You know best, Blonde Bill."

"And shall act for the best, so now see to getting the men ready, and mind you, Black Bill, let no rider carry booty."

"Put it all upon the packhorses—do you hear?" and there was a strange significance in the manner and tone of Blonde Bill as he spoke the last words, and his companion did understand that he had some other deep game on hand.

Wheeling upon his heel, Blonde Bill strode on through the thicket of pines until he came to the wall of rock.

There, from a ledge, fifty feet above, was suspended a rope ladder, which the man ascended with perfect ease.

Reaching the ledge a few steps brought him to another ladder, hanging as was the other one, from a shelf above.

This too he scaled and found himself upon a space some fifty feet square, and upon the back part of which was built a stout cabin of logs.

The door of this was open, and a bright light was shining within, displaying two rooms that were by no means uncomfortable.

The furniture was rustic, but skillfully made, and consisted of a table and chairs, with a bed in each room.

Bear, deer, wolf, and various other kinds of skins of wild animals adorned the walls and the flooring of the two rooms.

A cupboard was in the one where the door was open, and dishes were visible upon the shelves, while in the large open fireplace were cooking utensils.

A rack of books, a guitar and flute, and innumerable rifles and other arms were visible here and there hanging about the walls, while, seated at the table reading, was a woman.

A woman, and one of strange, weird beauty, and seemingly out of place in that far, wild land of the border.

She was slightly above the medium height, her form was willowy and perfect in every curve, her head sat haughtily upon her shoulders, and her face was dark, full of passion, with regular, imperious features, and eyes that were large, burning, and black as ebony, while they were shaded with lashes of remarkable length.

A beautiful woman she certainly was, and yet a woman to both love to madness, and to fear in anger and in hate.

Her age it would be hard to guess at, for she seemed scarcely over twenty, so fresh was her complexion, and yet she might have been thirty.

Her hair was red-gold, in strange contrast with her complexion, eyes, and dark lashes and brows, and she wore it braided and coiled upon her haughty head like a coronet.

She was dressed in a close-fitting bodice of buckskin, beautifully beaded and embroidered, and a skirt of the same material hung to her ankles.

Her feet were incased in handsome boots, and, like her hands, were small and shapely.

At the sound of a footprint she glanced up and threw down her book, while she said in a cheery tone:

"Welcome back, Will, for I was anxious about your long stay."

"You had cause, Helen, I assure you, for your anxiety," said the man, throwing himself into a chair upon the other side of the table.

"Indeed! you were in danger then?" and she gazed upon him with earnest interest.

He was a man of striking appearance, as seen by the light falling full upon him.

He possessed a well-knit, wiry form, had a military bearing, and was dressed in buckskin leggings stuck in cavalry boots, a hunting-shirt of blue flannel, a buckskin jacket, and above his waist was a sash, hiding a leather belt in which were three revolvers and a knife.

He had thrown from his head, as he entered, a gray sombrero, and the act revealed a mass of waving hair, only a shade darker than that of the woman's, with a full, flowing beard, falling to his waist, and of the same hue as his hair.

His face was bronzed by exposure—that is, the part visible above his beard; his eyes were black, fiery, restless, and almost fierce in their expression, and certainly he was a most striking-looking and very handsome man, but one who had taken the road to crime rather than that to honor.

"I will tell you, Helen, the danger we were in, for Black Bill was with me."

"Ah, that man!" she said, with a sneer.

"Yes, Helen; and I cannot see why you do not like him."

"Like us, he has had reverses in life, and has been driven to outlawry."

"To-day, when we were being pursued by our foes, he said to me:

"Bill, save yourself and leave me, for you have one dependent upon you, whose heart it would break to lose you. I am alone in the world, and the devils will be content to get me and the booty."

"Said he that, Will?" quickly asked the woman.

"He did."

"Then have I misjudged him! But go on with your story."

"We left the men in camp, as you know, Helen, and Bender having given us information that a superintendent was coming on to take charge of the Bonanza mine, and would doubtless come well fixed, Black Bill and myself took the road, to halt the coach and gather taxes."

"But it seems the superintendent—Colonel Roland—came by ambulance, and we pounced upon him, got a good haul of booty, considerable money and jewelry—for he had his daughter with him."

"We packed the plunder on the ambulance horses, and did not push ahead, for we feared no pursuit; but that Magic Doctor—"

"Frank Powell?"

"Yes—and the Kid Glove Miner came on in chase, accompanied by Monk Harris, the stagecoach driver, Faro Fred, and those three queer

hunters known as Tempest Tom, Lanky, and Duck Leg Dick."

"A bad party to fight, Will," said the woman.

"Yes—one that we dared not fight, for fear it would make matters worse; so we threw up our hands, as our horses could not outfoot the ones they rode, and were taken back to Golden Gulch."

"Black Bill had hit the colonel a stunning blow on the head when we robbed him, and we were taken before him and his daughter, and the girl was told to pass sentence upon us."

"The girl!"

"Yes; Ruby Roland, her name is."

"Well?"

"They meant to hang us, and we saw it, and this the girl did not want, so she made us swear to reform, which we did—"

"Swear?" said the woman, with a sneer.

"Of course."

"And meant not to keep it?"

"Of course not—but a forced oath is not binding, you know."

"So I have heard."

"Well, we took the oath, and, though Powell and the others were furious, they let us go, and sent Tempest Tom and Duck Leg Dick to guard us out of camp."

"On the way we met the Seven Stars—"

"Boss Bender and his six men?"

"Yes, and I concluded I would use them."

"You know I have paid them for giving me information at times, though they have never known where our secret camp was, so when the hunters gave us our weapons Black Bill and myself shot them down—"

"The first step toward reformation."

"Yes."

"And killed them?"

"Duck Leg Dick was killed, but when we rode after the Seven Stars and returned along the trail with them, we found that Tempest Tom was not lying where he had fallen, though the other was."

"He will warn Powell and the Vigilantes."

"Yes; and Powell and his party are bad enough for me, without calling in the Vigilantes."

"So we dashed on, and I left Bender and his men to guard Echo Gap, telling him I would come up with my men by dawn to aid him."

"And you will do so, Will?"

"No, indeed: for what care I for Bender and his gang?" he answered, with a light laugh.

"They will be ridden down, and then our foes will find us here."

"No, for I leave at once."

"Leave, Will?"

"Yes; I have another plan in view, so come, Helen, get together your traps, for by dawn we must be miles from here," and Blonde Bill sprung to his feet and set to work with a will packing up, the woman doing likewise without a word of comment upon his sudden determination to desert their secret retreat, where they had long dwelt in security.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE TAX GATHERERS.

The sun was just rising, and casting long, slanting rays of gold into Echo Gap, brightening up the dark recesses of the hills and valleys, when a party of horsemen dashed up to within sight of the canyon.

Suddenly they drew rein, as a tall form stepped out of a pine thicket and confronted them.

It was a man over six feet, awkward-looking, loose-jointed, yet with every indication of possessing activity and strength.

He was clad in buckskin, wore moccasins, had a wild-cat skin cap, and was evidently a thorough borderman.

He carried a rifle across his arm, and wore a belt of arms that had the appearance of being frequently put to use.

Standing calmly in the trail leading to Echo Gap, he awaited the approach of the horsemen, who numbered some thirty men, all well mounted and thoroughly armed.

That most of the horsemen were miners, their dress and appearance indicated; but then there were several exceptions, and these were at the head of the party.

One of these, and who appeared to be the leader, was a man of large stature, but graceful in his bearing, and sat upon a horse as though he were a part of the animal.

His face was stern, handsome, and bronzed by exposure, while his eyes were black and piercing.

He wore a mustache that did not wholly conceal his resolute mouth, and his hair was black, waving, and fell below his shoulders.

His dress was a corduroy suit, loose jacket, beneath which was visible a belt of arms, cavalry boots armed with spurs, and a dove-colored sombrero, turned up on the left side by a gold pin representing a beaver, the grinning teeth of the animal being represented by pearls, and the eyes by diamonds.

Certainly, to look upon the man, he was one to admire, and to know him would be to trust him as one who would be true in friendship and implacable in hate.

Upon one side of him rode a man of military

bearing, and dressed in an undress uniform of blue cloth, but without insignia of rank or brass buttons thereon.

He wore a black slouch hat, cavalry boots, and had passed the meridian of life, for his hair and mustache were iron-gray.

Upon the left of the person just described, and who I may here say was Frank Powell, the Magic Doctor of Golden Gulch,* rode another individual of striking appearance, and who, a gambler by profession, answered to the name of Faro Fred.

Added to a reckless, attractive face, fearless and frank in the extreme, he had the form of an Apollo, and attired it in a suit that partook of the swell or dandy, and seemed out of place in that wild mining-region.

He wore diamonds—his arms were mounted with gold, and his broad-brimmed sombrero was looped up on the left side with a pin representing a hand holding half a dozen playing-cards.

The hand was of gold, and one finger had a ring on it in which was set a diamond of rare beauty, while the cards were of silver, the hearts and diamonds visible being represented by clusters of rubies, and the clubs and spades by jet, carved to the proper shape of the card spots.

Behind these there was a motley crowd of men, who had been hastily picked for the work before them, which was to hunt down the Tax-gatherers, as the road-agents under Bender Bill were called by the people of Golden Gulch.

"Well, Lanky, what news?" called out Dr. Powell, as the party halted in front of the hunter.

"Nary news, Doc, that I has seen," was the quiet response.

"You left the Gulch last night with Mr. Hale?"

"Him as they calls the Kid Glove Miner?"

"Yes."

"Yas, Doc, we left tergether, an' he left me here, while he went his way."

"Ah! which way did he go?"

"Up ter his cabing in ther mountains."

"Did he have any reason for going, Lanky?"

"I dunno, Doc."

"We come on here, going ter ther camp o' the Seven Stars, an' seein' that they had levanted fer good, Kid Gloves told me ter lay low, right here, an' ef yer comed up ter say he would be back by sun-up."

"I hope nothing has befallen him," said Doctor Powell, anxiously.

"Oh, he kin take keer o' hisself, that pilgrim kin, Doc!"

"I don't doubt it, Lanky, under ordinary circumstances, but— Ah! there he comes now, and by the Eagle of the Rockies! he has company, too."

All eyes now turned upon the one of whom the doctor had been speaking, and beheld a horseman approaching, and driving before him three men who were bound together with lariats.

The horseman was well mounted, sat his horse with the ease of a perfect rider, and was one that could never pass unnoticed.

He was dressed as a miner, yet his pants, shirt and jacket were of fine material, his boots of handsome make, and his hat a soft, wide-brimmed slouch.

He was thoroughly armed with weapons of the finest workmanship, and had the face of one who knew how to use them, and was possessed of indomitable pluck.

His face was one that would have been a study for an artist, for its strength and refinement, added to its perfect manliness.

His hair was not worn long, as was the custom on the border, and he wore no beard whatever, a circumstance that revealed every feature, and also the look of sadness that seemed to haunt the mouth, and to which a dreamy look in his eyes but added intensity.

But, strangest of all, he wore upon his hands a pair of light gauntlet gloves, the constant wearing of which had caused the miners of Golden Gulch to call him the Kid Glove Miner.

That he was a man with a history, none could doubt that looked upon him; and that he had just been engaged in some death-struggle was evident from the prisoners he drove before him.

Yet he came on with the easy air of one who took the chances of life and death most coolly.

"Hello, Hale, what have you got there?" cried Doctor Powell, referring to the prisoners, who held their heads so turned that it was impossible to see their faces.

"Pirates to hang," was the quiet response, as the Kid Glove Miner rode up and joined the party, while Lanky shouted:

"It are Boss Bender an' two o' his pards, as sure as shootin'."

"By Jove, Hale, where did you catch them?" asked Faro Fred, while the three prisoners stood cowed and silent by.

"Up at my cabin."

"Why, I thought they went on to Echo Gap with Blonde Bill," said Frank Powell.

"It seems not, for I caught them in my cabin like rats in a trap; but ask them, and they may enlighten you," said Horace Hale.

Turning to Boss Bender, who was a hang-dog looking villain, as were also his comrades, Doctor Powell said:

"Well, Bender, it seems that you have run your neck into the noose at last."

"It do look uncommon the way," was the sullen response.

"You have long been suspected of being rascals, you and your gang, but your going off with Blonde Bill and Black Bill last night gives you away as such."

"Who says I was with 'em?"

"I say so."

"Did you see us with ther Bills?"

"No, but Tempest Tom, whom you shot down with poor Duck Leg Dick, and left for dead, didn't die, as you hoped, and he saw you ride off with Blonde Bill and his comrade."

"Now, where did you go?"

"They left me here."

"With your gang?"

"With my pards."

"And you, it seems, went on a raid against the cabin of the Kid Glove Sport?"

The man was silent, and the doctor asked:

"Where is the rest of your gang?"

"Ax him," and the desperado nodded toward the Kid Glove Miner, who said, when Dr. Powell looked toward him for an explanation:

"We left them dead up in my cabin."

"Dead?"

"Yes, Powell."

"All four of them?" and Frank Powell's face but reflected the surprise that all felt.

"Yes; I found them in my cabin robbing me, and I had to kill four of the villains before Bender and these other two would surrender."

"I am sorry, for I would much have preferred that they should have been hanged."

The Kid Glove spoke with the utmost coolness, and the thought that one man would boldly attack seven, kill four of them, and make prisoners of the remaining three, struck the party with amazement, which held all speechless excepting Monk Harris, the driver of the overland stage out of Golden Gulch, and who had given up his trip out to join the trailers of the Tax-gatherers.

And he, in his stentorian tones, shouted:

"Yer kilt four out o' ther Seven Stars, did yer, Kid Gloves, and bagged t'other three?"

"Waal, I hereby names yer Red Lightnin', an' when yer strikes ag'in, them as yer hits he'll better lie low."

This little speech of Monk Harris was received with a burst of cheering, in response to which Horace Hale raised his hat, while Frank Powell said:

"I congratulate you, Hale, for you are indeed a man of chance, and Monk's name is not unworthy of you."

"Red Lightnin', ther Man o' Chance!" yelled Monk Harris.

"Three cheers fer him, pards, an' when I gits back ter ther Gold Brick bar in Golden Gulch I'll drown myself drinkin' his health, durned ef I don't!"

The cheers were given with a will, and then Horace Hale said, quickly:

"Gentlemen, this is a bad way to start upon a trail, for we but warn our foes of our coming."

"Shall we dash on, Powell, to the Tax-gatherers' camp, or first hang these fellows?"

"We'll ride on, Hale, and make use of these fellows in getting there, for Blonde Bill doubtless has his guards out."

"Here, Bender, I wish you and your two pards to ride in front, and five of my own men, that might pass as your gang at a glance, shall follow you."

"Come, no nonsense, for I shall stand none."

The prisoners were hastily mounted and so tied upon their horses that they would not appear to be bound to any one seeing them approach.

Then four men of the party, selected as those who, at a casual view, would be likely to be taken for the remainder of the band of Seven Stars, rode behind Bender and his comrades, and the party moved forward into Echo Gap, the remaining horsemen, with Frank Powell and Red Lightning at their head, following some distance in the rear, and ready to dash forward at a moment's notice of danger ahead.

CHAPTER IV.

THE EXECUTION IN ECHO GAP

THROUGH the Echo Gap, where none of the miners in and around Golden Gulch, had found any reason for going before, and which had been given up as the haunt of the Tax gatherers, the party rode.

"I guesses we'll git a shot afore long," said Boss Bender, calling back to the four men behind him, and who covered the three prisoners with their weapons against any attempt at escape.

"Well, if we do, you'll get it first, Boss," was the reply.

* Dr. Frank Powell, now of La Crosse, Wis., late Surgeon in the U. S. Army, and also known upon the border as "White Beaver, the Medicine Chief of the Winnebagos," "Fancy Frank," and generally spoken of by the red-skins as "Mighty Medicine." —THE AUTHOR.

"Blonde Bill hain't no man ter see folks ride inter his camp 'thout shootin'," continued Bender.

"Oh! he'll not fire upon you, knowing you to be his friend, Boss."

"Thar are no tellin' what he may do, fer he are a queer one."

"Well, if he happens to fire on us and kill you, then you'll escape death at the end of a rope."

This reference to his possible end did not please the outlaw, and he remained silent, and the party continued on their way through the walls of rocks.

At length they came to the opening, a plaza, before referred to, and beheld the smoke curling up from the camp-fires in the pine thicket.

They also saw the cabin on the shelf of rock, and at once halted.

The remainder of the party soon came up, and instantly Frank Powell ordered the two men to guard the prisoners, while the rest prepared to charge directly into the pines.

He knew that the Tax-gatherers were said to number twenty-five, while other reports placed them at only half a score.

But, with the good men and true at his back, the Magic Doctor, as the miners called him, gave the order:

"Charge upon them, all!"

With a yell the gallant band charged, their reins held well in their left hands, their revolvers in their right, and their horses at full speed.

The first to dash into the pines were Dr. Powell and Red Lightning, and behind them, close upon their heels, were Faro Fred, Colonel Roland and Monk Harris, with Lanky and the miners near at hand.

Up to the pines they dashed, and then drew rein, for not an outlaw was to be seen.

Skurrying through the pines, a thorough search was made, and with a like result.

There was every evidence that the camp had been hastily deserted, for plunder of various kinds, not worth taking away, had been scattered here and there.

The rope-ladder leading to the cabin above still hung in its place, and up this went Red Lightning, Frank Powell and Faro Fred.

Upon the door of the cabin was sticking a piece of white paper, which had written thereon:

"The Tax-gatherers of the Overland bid farewell to Golden Gulch for awhile."

"But let not their foes believe that they will not hear from them again, for Blonde Bill and his Bravo Band still live."

This Red Lightning read aloud, and the three men looked at each other in surprise.

"But whither have they gone?" asked Faro Fred.

"That we will find out, and then give chase," said the doctor.

"No trail has yet been discovered, and it is evident that they have covered up their tracks well," remarked Red Lightning, and he began a thorough search of the deserted cabin.

The furniture remained intact, but all else had been carried off, and the closest scrutiny revealed no clew to the way which the Tax-gatherers had taken.

No trail could be found leading up the Gap, even by Lanky, whose skill as a trailer no one would dispute, and yet horses, men and booty had most mysteriously disappeared.

Determined not to give it up yet awhile, Frank Powell again dispersed his men on the search, and after several hours they returned one by one to report a failure to find the slightest clew.

"Well, we must give them up and attend to the business now on hand," said the doctor, in a disappointed tone.

"An' what are thet biz, Doc?" asked Monk Harris, and the answer all guessed.

"The trial of the prisoners, for I believe, Hale, you turned them over to us for trial?"

"Certainly, Powell, if you think a trial is necessary."

"As for myself, I have been on the track of Bender and his men for some time, and my revenge will be complete only when I see these three die," and the dreamy eyes of Red Lightning burned under the intensity of some inward emotion.

"Why, have they wronged you so deeply?" asked Faro Fred with surprise.

"They have wronged me so deeply that their worthless lives even can never wipe out the stain," was the almost fierce reply of Red Lightning as he turned away to seek control of himself.

"Then your testimony will doubtless be sufficient to hang them," said Frank Powell.

"I will not appear against them, Powell, but if you try them, and, not finding testimony sufficient to hang them, should set them free, I will follow on their trail and kill them, or die by their hands."

"More I will not say," and the man wheeled abruptly upon his heel and walked away.

"Well, men, it remains for us to see what shall be done with these wretches, so if any of you have any testimony to offer in their favor or against them, we will hear it, for there is no need, if guilty, of carrying them back to Golden Gulch," and Frank Powell glanced over the crowd.

"I kin hang 'em, Doc, fer I knows what they is," said Lanky stepping forward.

"Well, Lanky, what are they?"

"Catamounts, an' wuss, fer they is coyotes."

"Yer knows Lucky Pete, don't yer?"

All nodded assent.

"Waal, Lucky Pete hed dug a snug fortin' o' dust out o' a hole in ther hills, an' hed started home with it, in bank bills Faro Fred hed give him fer the metal; but somebody shot poor Pete, who it was I doesn't know, an' these heur galoots, with them as is dead, got his fortin' an' were goin' ter dervide it among 'em, when one night Bender here, while in his cabin war robbed o' ther hull lot by a masked man as comed in an' tuk it.

"This I heerd from Shorty, who are dead now up in Red Lightning's cabin, an' he were goin' ter tell me more, an' sell out ther gang, but I hasn't seen him since, an' his chips got calt in afore he did so."

"It are a lie, we never kilt Lucky Pete," growled Bender.

"You admit that Lucky Pete was killed then?" asked the doctor.

"Yas, somebody shot him, but we didn't, fer we found him a-dyin'."

"Did you take his money?"

"Yas."

"And it was taken from you again by a masked man?"

"Yas."

"Fard Doc, thar hain't no use argifyin' ther matter, fer I knows that these fellers has posted ther Tax-gatherers when I traveled with a rich load in ther old hearse, for Shorty hinted ter me as much."

"Yer see he thought they was gittin' cornered, an' consequently was goin' ter turn pious, so he begin by givin' his pards away," said Monk Harris.

"Cuss him! I are glad he got shot by that Kid Glove Terrer," said Bender savagely.

"He died a better death than it is likely you will, my man," said Colonel Roland, while Faro Fred said impatiently:

"Come, Powell, I for one am not in favor of wasting time on these wretches, for life is too short to tell over their crimes."

"That they deserve death, Red Lightning, as Monk here has christened Hale, gave us proof in what he said about trailing them to the bitter end if we set them free."

"If you wish to see them struck by lightning just turn them loose, and my word for it Hale will kill them before night."

"As it is, I say hang them, and if we find out afterward that we have wronged them, I'll erect a marble slab to their memory in my Gambling Hell."

"Thet sartinly oughter be all they c'u'd ax," said Monk Harris.

"Suppose you put it to the vote, Doctor Powell," suggested Colonel Roland, as he saw that Frank Powell did not wish to act hastily in the matter, and yet felt that he must do as the majority said.

"Very well, colonel, I will do so," and raising his voice, he continued:

"Men, in Golden Gulch, we have no courts, and the wrong-doers suffer sentence by the will of the people."

"These men have long been a bone of contention in the mines, and have often been threatened with death."

"Now you know that they left Golden Gulch with the two bodies of the Tax-gatherers last night, and Mr. Hale—"

"Beg parding, Doc, Red Lightning," corrected Monk Harris.

"I stand corrected, Monk."

"You know also, men, that Red Lightning, lately known as the Kid Glove Miner, found them robbing his cabin, and you heard his words that he would kill them if we spared them."

"Under these circumstances I leave it to you what their fate shall be?"

"Hang 'em!"

The words were uttered by every lip, forming a hoarse, deep chorus that made the three prisoners shudder and turn livid with fear.

"Is there no dissenting voice?" calmly asked the doctor, glancing over the crowd.

Not a voice answered, and after waiting, what seemed an eternity to the prisoners, Doctor Powell continued:

"Bender, you and your comrades have heard your doom, and may Heaven have mercy upon you."

"Monk Harris, they are in your hands for execution!"

"They shell be execooted beautiful, an' hev no cause fer complainin'," answered the stage-driver, and calling to Lanky and several others, he quickly had the doomed wretches ready to meet their fate.

In vain were their pleadings for life, for they were dragged beneath a large tree, the nooses were placed about their necks, the other ends of the lariats were seized by willing hands, and the three guilty outlaws were dragged up into mid-air, while Frank Powell turned away with the remark in a low tone to Colonel Roland and Faro Fred:

"I know that they deserve their fate; but

my lips were sealed by a promise I could not break.

"See Hale, there on the cliff!"

They turned their eyes upon Red Lightning, who was standing upon the shelf of rock before the cabin, his arms folded across his broad breast, and calmly gazing down upon the hanging wretches.

But as they looked he came quickly down the rope ladder, and walking up to the victims of border justice, felt the pulse of each one.

"They are dead," he said, calmly, walking up to the doctor.

"Yes, and as soon as they are buried, we will return to Golden Gulch."

"I will remain, Powell, for I have a little work to do, and I must ask you to go to my cabin, bury those four dead bodies you will find there, if you will do this for me."

"Certainly, Hale; but you do not intend to remain here?"

"Yes, for a while."

More he would not say, and having buried the three outlaws, the party mounted their horses and rode away, leaving Red Lightning alone at the deserted camp of the Tax-gatherers.

CHAPTER V.

KEEPING A SECRET.

BLONDE BILL and his outlaw band lived too much "on the wing," so to speak, for it to take them long to get ready for the road, and even the woman, Helen, proved an exception to her sex, and was waiting to start some time before the order was given to move.

Which way they were to go the half-score of men who comprised the band knew not, nor did Black Bill, who had not very long before cast his lot with the Tax-gatherers, have an idea where Blonde Bill was going.

Like the men, Black Bill, who acted as a lieutenant to the leader, stood waiting the order to march.

The packhorses, a dozen in number, were ready, and the riding-animals, saddled and bridled, stood by the side of their masters.

Two steeds awaited the chief and Helen, who were yet at the cabin.

Presently Blonde Bill came out upon the ledge, the edge of which overhung the camp fifty feet below, and called out:

"Bring those animals directly under this cliff, and all of you men but two come up here."

Wondering, the men obeyed, and Blonde Bill ordered all hands to get hold of one end of the cabin and to push together, adding:

"I'll let you into a secret, pards, for this cabin was not built against this cliff without a purpose, as you shall see."

The men obeyed, and to their surprise the cabin moved, and one end rolled away from the side of the cliff, for it had been built upon rollers.

Some six feet from the rocky wall they moved the end, the act displaying to their astonished gaze a large cavern, the entrance to which was lighted up by the fire built upon the ledge.

Within the cavern was a huge windlass and uprights, which Blonde Bill at once ordered set upon the edge of the cliff and made fast with ropes to the cabin.

Then a network was lowered by the windlass, and the leader called out to the two men below:

"Rig one of those pack-horses into that harness, and be lively about it, men!"

The order was quickly obeyed, and with two men at each handle of the windlass, the horse was drawn to the ledge, upon which he landed in safety, among the surprised comments of the men.

"Lead him into the cavern there," ordered Blonde Bill, while the network was again lowered, and again a horse was drawn up and led into the cavern.

"You certainly have a most remarkable means of escape here without leaving any trace behind you," said Black Bill, admiringly.

"Yes, I was prospecting in the mountains here one day and came out of this cavern.

"I took in its advantages, and built my cabin here, as you see, on log rollers, so that it would wholly hide the cave, appear to be built upon the solid rock, and yet could be moved by some little force."

"My mine in the cavern did not pan out rich, but it gave me this secret, which Helen and myself have alone known until to-night, and I will defy even that sharp-eyed Kid Glove Miner, and Doctor Powell, too, to find out how we leave this camp, unless they burn the cabin down, and it is not at all likely they will do that."

"But how will you get the cabin back into place?" asked Black Bill, to whom he had spoken.

"By ropes fastened to the logs we can easily pull it back."

"But there comes the last horse, and we will get the windlass down and move on our way."

The horses had now all been brought up, and without accident, though their flight in mid-air greatly alarmed them, and the windlass was at once taken down and carried into the cabin.

Then, when all was in readiness, Blonde Bill ordered the men into the cavern, and with ropes attached to the back of the cabin, it was drawn securely back to its former place, leaving no trace of its having been moved.

With a pine torch in his hand Blonde Bill then led the way through the cavern, which was large and rambling off into a number of dark passageways.

But the leader seemed to know well the way, and, after half an hour's march at a slow pace, they came out into a little glen which seemed to be in the very heart of the mountains.

"Well, cap'n, you is ther boss," said one of the men admiringly, as he glanced around him.

Blonde Bill made no reply, but raised Helen to her saddle, mounted his own horse, and motioning for the others to do likewise, led the way up the glen.

It was bright starlight, and not very long before daybreak, so he pressed on at as lively a pace as the pack-horses could keep up until a mile had been gone over, and the trail led to the edge of a precipice.

Far below them the roaring of water rushing along could be heard, and before them, some hundred feet distant, was the other bank.

Then the eyes of all fell upon a dark mass of something stretching from side to side.

Certainly it was too frail for a bridge; but what else could it be?

"Men, as soon as day breaks, our trail lies across yonder bridge," announced Blonde Bill, and his words settled it in the minds of his followers as to what it was they saw.

"Is that a bridge, cap'n?" asked one.

"Yes—just that, and nothing else!"

"It are uncommon shaky, hain't it?"

"Not a bit. Strong as a railroad suspension."

"It do look awful skeery!"

"It is built of the strongest ropes, and the footing is of stout sticks, while there are ropes for guard-rails upon each side," explained Blonde Bill.

"Lordy, but it do hev a queer look."

"I shall go first, to show you that there is no danger. My sister will come next, and Black Bill will follow. Then the pack-horses will come over—"

"Will they come though, cap'n?"

"Of course they will, you leather-head!"

"It are dubious."

"They must be blindfolded, and each one tied close behind the other, and there will be no trouble."

The men shook their heads. It was evident they did not like that frail pathway across the fearful chasm.

"Is this some more of your work, Blonde Bill?" asked Black Bill, as he stepped upon the structure and gazed fearlessly down into the dark depths beneath his feet.

"Yes; I was a midshipman in the navy in my boyhood, and got accustomed to dizzy heights, so proposed to Helen to make a bridge across. I had two men to help in the work, and it was no easy task, I assure you; but it is stoutly built, although it looks so light. See, these six large ropes are made fast to these large trees here, and on the other bank they are secured just as well, while all of these cross sticks for the flooring are stout, and are each one tied to the cables with rawhide."

"It is a most ingenious work, I think; but is there no other way of getting off of this ridge that we are on?"

"Not for a horse; and the way is then through a little cave, that runs down into a valley, and only a man can pass through it, and then he will have to crawl."

"I tell you, Black Bill, I looked this wild country over for gold, for I needed it greatly; and yet, while others got rich, I found not even paying dirt," said Blonde Bill, bitterly.

"You are certainly a good prospector, at any rate, and deserved success; but do you not think the men will refuse to go across the bridge?"

"Not when they see how really strong and safe it is."

"And the two who helped you build it, will not fear to trust themselves to it."

"They are not here," was the reply, in a tone that made Black Bill ask:

"Did they desert your band?—for if they did, they doubtless know the secret of the cavern hidden by your cabin."

"Yes, they knew that too; but the day we completed this bridge, Black Bill, their lives ended, for it was a secret I did not wish known, so I hid it under their death."

Blonde Bill had spoken in a very low tone, as he uttered the last words, as he did not wish his men to hear what he said.

"Ah! you killed them?" asked Black Bill in a suppressed voice.

"Oh no, I simply sent them across the bridge and they failed to reach the other side," was the cool response.

Black Bill made no reply, but glanced at the sister of the man who had just confessed to taking life to hide the secret of the bridge.

She sat upon the mossy bank, leaning lazily against a tree, and showed no sign of having heard the words of Blonde Bill, though certainly she had done so for her eyes were wide open.

Then Black Bill looked down into the dark depths, where, two hundred feet below, the mountain stream dashed along, and he could not but think that one who fell from that dizzy height, would never reveal the secret which Blonde Bill so zealously guarded.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEATH-TRAP.

It was just dawn, when Blonde Bill called out:

"Come men; we must press on!"

Some men were half asleep, others buried in deep thought, and several pacing to and fro upon the edge of the precipice, perhaps awed by the scene.

The woman had closed her eyes and sunk into an apparently peaceful slumber, in spite of her surroundings, and Black Bill had leaned against a tree, his arms folded across his breast; and his thoughts evidently of a gloomy nature.

At the command of Blonde Bill all started.

The gray dawn showed them that the bridge looked stronger by day than in the darkness, though still it was but a frail affair at best.

The daylight also gave them a glance down into the depths below, where certain death awaited the man or beast that made a misstep in crossing to the other side.

"Men, I will go first with my horse, and my sister will follow me. Then the packhorses will come, led by Black Bill, and when the last animal has left the bridge upon the other side you start. King, you bring up the rear, and see that there is no hanging back. Let each man lead his own horse, and keep close upon the heels of the animal in his front, and all going in a compact mass will keep the bridge from swinging. Do you understand, King?"

"I do, sir."

"Then blindfold the packhorses, and tie them together!"

While the men were doing this Blonde Bill and his sister bandaged the eyes of their horses, and Black Bill followed suit.

Then the leader stepped upon the bridge, leading his horse, which followed him unhesitatingly.

Helen kept close upon the heels of the animal in her front, and behind her came the first packhorse.

That the dumb brutes knew that there was some dire danger surrounding them was evident; but their instinct taught them to trust in their masters, and the line strung out across the bridge.

Here and there the ropes upon one side or the other seemed to give a little, and the frail structure swung to and fro at a seemingly dangerous degree; but the different movements of the horses soon checked this, and watching with anxious eyes, the men saw the chief reach *terra firma*.

Quickly his sister followed, then packhorse after packhorse, until Black Bill brought up the rear.

Several of the animals neighed wildly with delight, as they reached the other side, and the men upon the opposite shore cheered.

"Now, King, set the men to moving!" called out Blonde Bill.

"Ay, ay, captain!" promptly came the answer, and the first of the eight men stepped cautiously upon the bridge, leading his blindfolded horse.

Then another followed close upon his heels, and a third, and a fourth, until the line had left the other shore and was midway across.

"Ho, men!"

The words came from the lips of Blonde Bill, and the expression upon his face was fiendish.

At the call the leading man halted quickly, for he knew not what was the matter, and this brought the line to a stand-still, the men livid, the horses trembling.

"What is it, cap'n?" cried one in alarm.

"Simply that as I have no more need of your services, I intend to send you to perdition together!"

Cries of terror broke from the lips of the doomed men, and they saw that he held in his hands an ax and stood by the trees to which the ropes were made fast.

"Mercy! mercy!"

The pleading cry arose, and with it came the first blow upon the ropes.

In horror the men beheld the blows falling thick and fast, and the woman standing by and gazing upon them, unheeding their cries and the devilish act of her brother.

"Black Bill, do you save us, fer ther love o' God!" shouted a trembling, terror-maddened man.

But he to whom the appeal was made shook his head, and made no move to check the fiendish sacrifice.

A few more strokes of the sharp ax, and then came the snapping, tearing sound, mingled with the curses and prayers of the doomed wretches and the terrified shrieks of the dumb brutes.

Then, down, down they sunk with lightning speed, in one huddled mass, to fall with sickening thuds into the torrent far below.

CHAPTER VII.

SOMETHING ABOUT GOLDEN GULCH AND THE GOLDITES.

GOLDEN GULCH was not a place of residence to be proud of.

True, there were hundreds of miners working their little claims for miles around it, and the "city," as it was patriotically called, was the center of attraction of a population numbering some fifteen hundred, when the outlying camps were counted in.

The town consisted of one street down the center of a valley, through which ran a limpid creek called a river, and into which flowed several rivulets, called creeks.

The camps were scattered here, there, everywhere; but the town proper consisted of the Gold Brick Hotel, a pretentious two story and attic building with sixty rooms, and much better kept inside, than it looked without.

Paint it had none on the outside; but Major Simon Suggs the proprietor knew how to run an inn well, and did not fail in keeping the Gold Brick by any means.

His transient custom was not large, but he had several permanent boarders, among which may be mentioned prominently, as they appear in this story, Colonel DeCamp Roland, and his lovely daughter, Doctor Frank Powell, Faro Fred, and Monk Harris.

Then there were half a score of storekeepers, with half a hundred day boarders, so that Major Simon Suggs was prospering, especially when I mention his bar, under the auspices of one, Jaques, who was just the man to run a liquor department at which a wild element pleaded for drinks.

After the Gold Brick, the most important place in Golden Gulch was Faro Fred's Temple of Chance, where nightly men lost and won what was to them fortunes.

There were several other taverns of an inferior style to the Gold Brick, a score of liquor saloons, and half as many stores, all built upon the rough pattern, but all making money for their proprietors.

A livery stable, with two vehicles to let, and half a hundred riding-horses, a couple of blacksmith shops, and some two-score residences, comprised Golden Gulch city proper, and to it flocked the miners from the camps around it.

Dr. Frank Powell, one of the most noted personages in the Gulch, had gone there as a miner, after a run of hard luck; but striking a poor claim, and at the same time rendering valuable surgical aid, he turned to his profession using his lancet and probe instead of his pick and shovel and the result was that he was making money, for his services were demanded for leagues around, and his cures and deeds of surgery had been so marvelous that he won the name of the Magic Doctor.

Fred Fairbanks, better known as Faro Fred, was a gambler by profession, and had made a fortune, it was said, in Golden Gulch.

But his hand was ever ready to aid the poor, and he had the pluck to always take the side of the under-dog in a fight, and thus had gained a well-deserved popularity.

He was a remarkably successful gambler, but no one had ever accused him of a dishonorable act, or the sly turn of the card.

Monk Harris was the boss stage-driver on the road.

Whole-souled, big-hearted, with the courage of a lion, and the capacity for whisky that a German has for lager.

No one had ever seen him drunk, and no one had ever met him when they did not know he had lately taken a drink.

He drove the road in good and bad weather, and had met with many adventures of deadly peril, yet loved danger for its excitement.

The Kid Glove Miner had been a guest at the Gold Brick upon his first arrival in the Golden Gulch.

He had come to the place from none knew where, had played a game with a man who had lately inherited a mine, and won it.

Then he had gone to the mine to live and work it, and numerous stories were afloat that there were ghosts seen there nightly, and that strange warnings had been given him if he remained there his death would follow.

But he had not heeded the ghosts or the warnings, and continued to work his mine with such profit that the eyes of Bender and his gang were turned upon him, and with a result the reader already knows.

From his coming Horace Hale had worn gloves, and hence his name of the Kid Glove Miner, and no one had seen him without them, whether eating, sleeping or waking.

Between Horace Hale and Frank Powell a strong friendship had sprung up, and they also numbered as a friend Faro Fred.

The mine which Horace Hale—who in this story is known as Red Lightning, the Man of Chance—had won had formerly been the property of one Edgar Elgin, who, with his wife, had come to that wild land to seek a home.

A handsome man, dressing almost foppishly, and with a noble nature, while his wife was a lovely woman, true as steel, the two became known as Elegant Ed and his Angel, and were beloved by all who knew them.

But one fatal day Elegant Ed and his Angel had been cruelly murdered, and among his papers was one directing that all of his effects and gold, and he left a large sum, should be turned over to a man living in Leavenworth, Kansas, whose name was William Blackstone.

Dr. Powell had written to said Blackstone, and a splendid-looking man appeared and claimed the property.

For a while all had gone well, but with a mania for gambling he had gambled away the Elgin mine which he had inherited, his gold went next, and in a few weeks he was a pauper.

From bad to worse he went, until at last he was driven to outlawry, and leagued himself with the Tax-gatherers of the Overland, where the reader has already met him under the name of Black Bill.

The important personages of Golden Gulch having now been introduced more fully to my reader, I will now resume the thread of my story in the chapter that follows.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COLONEL AND HIS DAUGHTER.

SEATED in one of the pleasantest rooms of the Gold Brick, the evening following the day of adventure at the camp of the Tax-gatherers, was a young and beautiful girl of eighteen.

She had a book open upon her lap, and yet she had not glanced at its pages for an hour.

Her face, too, was anxious, and she seemed lost in reverie.

Suddenly she started to her feet, casting the book upon the table, and stood in an attitude of listening.

The sound that had reached her ears was the tramping of hoofs without.

Then followed loud voices, and cheers from half a hundred throats.

"They have returned, and Heaven grant no harm has befallen my father—or those other gallant men."

She added the last words after a slight hesitation, and then turned toward the door.

But a quick step was heard without, and the door opened admitting Colonel Roland.

"Oh, father! I am so glad you have gotten back," and the maiden greeted him affectionately, at the same time taking his hat, cloak and gloves.

"And I am glad to get back, Ruby, for we have been in the saddle since midnight of last night, as you know."

"And did you overtake those wicked men, father, whom I so foolishly hoped would reform and allowed to depart?"

"No, my child; but we found their camp."

"They had fled then?"

"Yes; but the Lord only knows how."

"What do you mean, father?"

"Why, we could find no trail of how they had left their camp, and consequently could not pursue them."

"Then there was no battle between your men and the outlaws?"

"None."

"I am glad of that, for I feared for you, and thought it rash for you to go."

"I had to do my duty, Ruby."

"Yes, but you had that wound in your head, given you by that evil man they call Black Bill, and you should have stayed here."

"No, Ruby, I am an old soldier, and, as the whole trouble was on account of their robbing me, I could not allow other men to go without me to fight my battles."

"Then too, I have come into a new community, and will have a wild lot of fellows under me, in taking charge of this mine, and my going will have a good effect."

"Then you did not see an outlaw?"

"Yes, we hanged three prisoners—"

"Hanged them, father?" cried Ruby Roland, in a startled tone.

"We did not capture them ourselves, for they were brought to us by that dashing fellow you admired so—"

"That I admired so, father?"

"Well, you thought him brave and handsome, Ruby, and he certainly is."

"To whom do you refer, sir?"

"They called him the Kid Glove Miner, but they have given him now the cognomen of Red Lightning, the Man of Chance."

"Mr. Hale, you mean, father?"

"Yes."

"And what is the cause of this new and startling appellation, sir?"

"It seems that he has a mine up in the mountains, and when he started on the trail of the outlaws last night, to keep them in sight if possible, he was accompanied by that long-legged hunter they call Lanky."

"The two followed the outlaws to Echo Gap, and there Kid Gloves, or Red Light—"

"Mr. Hale, father."

"Yes, Mr. Hale left Lanky—"

"Has the hunter no other name father?"

"If he has, God only knows what it is, and I doubt if the man does himself."

"These nick-names are terrible."

"Yes, but if you are going to undertake to hunt up the real name of every man who bears

a nick-name in these parts, Ruby, you have undertaken a job of gigantic proportions."

"Pray continue your story, father."

"Where did I leave off?"

"You said that Mr. Hale left the hunter—"

"Ah, yes, he left Lanky at the Gap, while he rode on to his cabin in the mountains, and which is near his mine."

"There he discovered the Seven Stars—"

"The Seven Stars, father?"

"I mean Boss Bender and his six pards, who—"

"Oh, father! you are already demoralized."

"You will be calling me by some horrible nick-name before long, and expect me to address you as pard, or something else of that kind."

The colonel laughed, and said:

"Well, Ruby, I have heard nothing, but Pard, Boss, Doc, Red Lightning, Kid Gloves, Lanky, Faro Fred, Black Bill, Blonde Bill, and such names all day so, that I do think I am a little off on the road to demoralization myself."

"But don't interrupt my story."

"I was saying that Hale left Lanky at the Gap, and he went on to his cabin."

"There he found a band of rascals known as Boss Bender and his band, and it seems they were robbing him."

"And more, in some way in the past, they had deeply injured Hale."

"He demanded their surrender, a fight followed, and he killed four of them."

"And was he killed?" asked Ruby with breathless eagerness.

"On the contrary he was not hurt, and he captured the three remaining scamps and marched them back to the Echo Gap, where we met him."

"He turned over his prisoners to Dr. Powell, and we went on to the camp of the Tax-gatherers, to find it deserted, as I told you."

"Then the three prisoners had a summary trial, according to Vigilante law here, and they were hanged."

"Oh, father, that was terrible for you to take part in."

"It was more terrible for them to take part in, Ruby," was the dry rejoinder.

"Well, sir, what then?"

"We set off upon our return to Golden Gulch, leaving Red—I mean Hale, in the deserted outlaw camp."

"Why did he remain there, sir?"

"I give it up."

"He is a mysterious man, and said he would remain, and did so."

"As we came on, Powell and Lanky went up to the cabin of Hale to bury the dead outlaws he had left there, and I came on with Faro Fred and the others."

"I hope no harm will befall Mr. Hale, father."

"I sincerely hope not, Ruby, for he is a man I like immensely."

"In fact, I never met three more splendid specimens of manhood, than are Doctor Powell, Hale and Faro Fred."

"They certainly are remarkable men, father, and would be shining marks elsewhere."

"They are here, and it takes no ordinary man to sail to the front in this land, Ruby."

"Sail to the front! Oh father! you will call me 'Rube, ole gal' before you have been here a week, if one day causes you to sail to the front with slang as you have to-night."

The colonel burst out into a hearty laugh, and said:

"Waal, Rube, ole gal, you won't be so far back down the lane yerself, I'll bet yer."

The maiden joined her father in his merriment, and the two went to supper, Plug Chew, the Chinee man-of-all-work at the Gold Brick having just announced that it was ready.

CHAPTER IX.

RED LIGHTNING ON THE TRAIL.

WHEN the party of Tax-gatherer-hunters departed from the deserted outlaw camp they left Red Lightning there alone.

In his searching about the place he had seen several circumstances that, put together, might make a chain of evidence as to which way Blonde Bill and his party had gone.

Accustomed to working by himself, he wished to solve the mystery alone, if in his power to do so.

He would have been glad to have had Frank Powell with him, and Faro Fred, for well he knew that they were thorough plainsmen and mountaineers, and that he could depend upon them.

But he cared not to call them away from the others, so stayed by himself.

As soon as the party were out of sight he walked straight to a spot beneath the cliff and stood gazing attentively down at the ground.

There was that there which caught his eyes, though Lanky and other fine trailers among the miners had failed to observe it.

"There have been fully a score of horses led to this spot," he muttered, "and there is no trace whatever of their being taken away."

"No, there is not a single hoof-track pointing away from this cliff, and yet here they certainly stood."

"To get into that solid wall of rock was impossible; there is no hole in the ground through which they could disappear, so what else is left for them but to leap to yonder high ledge?"

He looked up at the ledge of rock upon which had stood the outlaw cabin, and then quietly went to where the ladder hung and ascended it to the first terrace.

From there he went to the next rocky shelf, by means of the second rope-ladder, and stood before the cabin.

It was a foundation of rock, and tracks left no trace upon it.

"But iron-shod hoofs must leave some mark," he said.

Toward the cliff he walked, and then his eyes fell upon where some heavy and hard object seemed to have been twisted about upon the rock.

"Those are horses' tracks," he said. "But how did they get up here?"

He made a thorough search of the ledge and could find no way of egress.

"They were brought up here for a purpose, and there must be some secret way of retreat."

He looked to the cliff overhead, but saw that it was impossible for a man even to be drawn up its rugged face in safety.

Then he went into the cabin. He noticed now that, in spite of the solid rock, it had a flooring of planks.

One of these planks he forced up, and his eyes fell upon a smooth, round log upon which the cabin rested.

"Ah!" he said, and instantly he went to the rear of the cabin.

It was of stout logs, chipped off where they came together, so as to make them fit closely.

But his bowie-knife, and a large stone used as a mallet, would soon make a small opening.

Fixing the point of the blade between the two logs, he drove it to the hilt by a few vigorous strokes, and then, fastening his lariat to it, he drew it out.

There was a space then through which he could see, and he observed that the wall of rock just there was wanting, though at each end of the cabin, and along the roof, it touched.

"It is a cavern, and in there are they concealed, or that way have they gone."

"Ha! I remember the ax left in the camp below."

Instantly he left the cabin, descended the ladders and soon stood in the camp of the outlaws in the pine thicket.

There, buried in a log, where it had been left by a wood-chopper, was an ax.

He quickly drew it forth, and then went to where he had left his horse.

A good spot was then looked for, and found, and the animal was staked out to feed upon the rich grass, the saddle and bridle being hung up in a tree near by.

Returning to the ledge the bold man laid his revolvers upon the table near by, and swung his ax for the first blow.

The wood was not very hard, and soon the chips began to fly.

But it was hard work cutting through a solid wall, even of wood, and darkness came on before his task was completed.

But wood was in plenty, and a fire was built, and once more the persevering man set to work and in an hour's longer time, his ax went through.

Seizing a brand from the fire he beheld that there was indeed a cavern at the back of the cabin.

With his dull ax he then began to enlarge the opening, and after a long time had space sufficient to admit of his passing through.

A cool current of air came through the cavern, which proved to him that it had an outlet, and this caused him to feel certain that the outlaws were not concealed in there.

Pretty well fagged out with his loss of rest the night before, and his hard day's work, he rolled himself in his blanket and laid down to rest.

But, with the first glimmer of dawn he awoke, spread the contents of his haversack before him and ate his breakfast, making himself a tin-cup of coffee which greatly strengthened him.

Then, with a pine torch in one hand and a revolver in the other, he entered the cavern.

The first thing his eyes fell upon was the windlass and uprights, and the secret was out, as to how the horses had been gotten up to the ledge.

His torch lighting his way, he went on through the cavern, and his quick eyes detected the marks of the iron hoofs upon the rocky flooring, so that he was not at a loss to know which of the numerous branches of the cavern to take.

At last his torch paled, and he found himself in broad daylight.

"I wish I could get my good horse on this ridge, and then I would ask them no odds," he muttered.

"If I only had help we could put up the windlass and draw them up; but as I have started in alone, I will so continue, if I push ahead on foot."

And push ahead on foot he did, easily following the trail of the fugitive outlaws.

That they would feel perfectly safe as regarded pursuit, he did not doubt, for their secret was too well-guarded for them to fear it would be found out.

"Well, I have solved the secret of their escape, and I am on their trail," he said, in a low tone.

Suddenly he came to a stand-still, for a human form stood not six paces from him, half sheltered by a tree, and a revolver covered his heart, held in a hand that was as firm as a rock, while a voice said, sternly:

"Halt, stranger!"

CHAPTER X. THE STRANGER'S STORY.

THAT Red Lightning was caught there was no doubt whatever.

He was following on the trail of desperate men he well knew; but, so confident was he that they would not dream of pursuit, that he had not been very cautious in his advance.

His revolvers were in his belt when the challenge came to halt, and he was not a man to throw away his life, when he saw no use of doing so.

His captor, or captors, as the case might be, were doubtless, he thought, the very men he was trailing.

But being a captive and taking the chances of escape were better than risking a shot from the steady hand that held a revolver covering him.

He saw before him a young man, scarcely over twenty, with dark eyes fringed by long lashes, a clean cut face with regular features, light golden hair, that fell in curls about his shoulders, and a mustache that shaded his lip, half concealing a very handsome mouth.

He was dressed in a riding-suit, the coat being a loose blouse; and a slouch hat, the brim pulled down over his eyes, shaded his face.

In the coolest manner possible Red Lightning took in the face, form and dress of the one who had said so sternly:

"Halt, stranger!"

Then, with no ring of excitement or annoyance, he asked:

"Well, sir, now that I have halted, what do you wish with me?"

The one who held the advantage seemed slightly disconcerted at this remarkable coolness and display of nerve under very trying circumstances, and remarked hesitatingly:

"You are following a trail?"

"I am."

"Whose trail?"

"That of an arrant band of cut-throats," was the prompt reply.

"Ah! to whom do you refer?"

"To the band of Blonde Bill, of which, if I mistake not, you are a member."

"You are mistaken, sir."

"I am glad to think so, though frankly I doubt you."

"Why should you?"

"Your being where you are at present."

"And where am I?"

"On a ridge, the ascent to which is a secret known, I believe, only to Black Bill and his band."

"Or, rather was, for I know it now."

"There is a person who dwells not very far from Golden Gulch who is known as the Kid Glove Miner."

"May I ask if you are that man?"

"We were discussing you, sir, not myself," was the haughty reply.

"True: so we will dispose of my identity first."

"You say that you suspected me of being one of Blonde Bill's bravoes?"

"I still suspect you, sir."

"And I say that I am not now a member."

"Now! Then you have been?"

"I admit it."

"And have left them?"

"No."

"What then?"

"They left me."

"Ah, a distinction without a difference."

"Yet I tell the truth."

"I joined the band some three months ago, to serve a purpose of my own, and Blonde Bill seemed to take a fancy to me, for he made me captain of his camp, as he called it."

"This morning at dawn I was left behind."

"Forgotten in the haste of departure, doubtless?"

"No, I was only too well remembered."

There was something significant in the tone and manner of the young man that attracted the attention of Red Lightning.

He still held him covered by his revolver, yet there seemed an air about him as though he had no desire to use the weapon.

"You speak in puzzles, young sir," said Red Lightning.

"How can I make myself understood?"

"By telling me why you left the band of Blonde Bill."

"First, answer me a question or two?"

"Well?"

"You are trailing the band?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I have reasons for wishing to meet Blonde Bill."

"Meet him as a friend?"

"No, as a bitter foe."

"Ah! I like that; but now tell me how it was you struck this trail?"

"I followed it from the camp."

"It was too well concealed for you to do that."

"No, for I saw where your horses had been taken to draw up on the cliff, and that they had not been led away from the spot."

"A thorough search revealed the cavern, and an ax gave me entrance to it."

"By Heaven! but you are a splendid trailer to nose out that secret."

"Now tell me if you are alone."

Red Lightning disdained to lie, although he felt that it would be better for him did he say he had comrades near by.

But he answered frankly:

"I am."

"And I am alone—so we are even."

"Now I will answer your question, for I can trust you."

"See, I do trust you," and the young man replaced his revolver in his belt, the act greatly surprising Red Lightning.

"Come with me, and I will show you why I left the band."

Unhesitatingly Red Lightning followed the strange young man until, after a walk of several hundreds of yards, they came to the deep gorge, through which dashed the mountain torrent far below.

Pointing to the rope-ends of the bridge, which were yet attached to the trees near where they stood, the young man said:

"This bridge spanned yonder chasm at dawn this morning."

"Yes, and has been cut, for I see the trees upon the other shore have the rope-ends still around them."

"True; it was cut by Blonde Bill!"

"To prevent pursuit?"

"No."

"Why, then, may I ask?"

"For a most devilish purpose."

"I do not doubt it, if Blonde Bill had aught to do with it."

"You appear to know him?" said the stranger, with a smile.

"I do."

"And so do I!" almost fiercely said the stranger.

Then he quickly added:

"But of that we will not speak, at least for the present."

"Now I tell you that, because Blonde Bill feared to trust the secret of his future hiding-place to his men, he sacrificed them."

"Sacrificed them?"

"Yes, here at this bridge."

"Great God! you do not mean to say that he cut the bridge with his men upon it?" cried Red Lightning in a tone of horror.

"That is just what he did."

"Holy Heaven!" can even that man be so vile?"

"Yes; he was so vile, so fiendish, as to send his entire band, with several exceptions, down into yonder depths this very morning."

"And those exceptions were?"

"A woman, for one."

"Ah?"

"Yes; and Black Bill, for another."

"Well, was there another?"

"Yes, I was the third and last exception!" was the low reply.

CHAPTER XI. ALLIES.

RED LIGHTNING was certainly astounded at this startling piece of news, given him by his strange captor, who had so generously released him.

That the miner knew Blonde Bill, and had some good reason for following upon his trail was true; but, that he believed him so very vile, as to thus rid himself of men who had fought for him and protected him in his outlawry he had not believed.

Three persons he had spared from the death-trap. Red Lightning could not understand his motive for this clemency, and so he asked:

"Why did he spare Black Bill, whom, if rumor is true in the mines, bid fair to supplant him as leader of the Tax-gatherers?"

"Oh! he recognized in Black Bill a man after his own heart, and admired him for his devilish nature."

"You are doubtless right; but you are sure that he spared the woman?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who she is?"

"I do."

"What is she supposed to be by the men?"

"Just what she is, his sister, we all knew her to be."

"And, may I ask, why he spared you?"

"He did not spare me."

"You said so awhile since."

"No, I said that I was one spared from going down with the death-trap."

"Pray, explain."

"He laid the trap for me, with the others but I escaped it."

"How?"

"I was ordered to bring up the rear, and I started the men on the bridge, each leading his horse, which was blindfolded."

"Knowing Blonde Bill I suspected him of treachery, and, after starting my horse on, close upon the heels of the one in advance, I sprung quickly back to the shadow of this tree."

"From here I watched and waited, and, all too soon came the realization of my fears, for I heard the fiend hail the men, to warn them of his devilish purpose, and then he began cutting at the ropes upon the other side."

"If I live to be a hundred years old, sir, I shall never forget that scene of horror."

"The men pleaded piteously for help and mercy, the bridge swayed to and fro wildly, the horses trembled with terror, and Blonde Bill laughed at the misery he caused."

"At last the men appealed to the woman to save them; but she has a heart of ice and made no effort to do so."

"Then the men called to Black Bill to aid them."

"But cold, smiling, he made no sign of disapproval of his comrade's act, nodded his head to the men, and saw them go down."

"I was believed to be among the number that thus went to their awful doom."

"But my suspicion of treachery saved me, and now I am left to avenge myself."

"And will you do so?"

"I will tell you, sir, that I joined the band three months ago for one purpose only, and that was to revenge myself upon Blonde Bill."

"But I fear I am a coward, for I have let many a chance go by to take his life, and shrunk back at the last moment."

"Well, the time will yet come when you are avenged."

"Now, as we both have one mission to perform, suppose we become allies?"

"Willingly."

"But tell me, are you the Kid Glove Miner?"

"So men have called me in Golden Gulch because I wear gloves."

"Do you wear them all the time?"

"Yes."

"From choice, or—"

"I wear them from stern necessity," said Red Lightning in a tone that prevented the stranger from pushing the matter further, so he said, quickly:

"I meant not to be impertinent; but now that I know your name—"

"My name is Horace Hale."

"Ah, then, as I know you, Mr. Hale, let me introduce myself as Frank King, and an avenger upon the trail of Blonde Bill."

Red Lightning really liked the young stranger, and held out his hand, which was readily grasped, and the two became allies in a common cause, whatever the motives that prompted them.

CHAPTER XII.

THE OUTLAWS' COMPACT.

AFTER the diabolical deed of Blonde Bill, the three persons, the two men and the woman, stood gazing in silence down into the torrent, watching the struggles for life in vain of man and beast.

Away they dashed upon the torrent, to pass from sight, and Blonde Bill believed that by one fell stroke he had gotten rid of the band whom he had of late felt doubt of.

He did not know of the form crouching upon the other side, behind the trees that held the end of the swinging bridge, or he would not have been so serene in his mind at his act.

"Come, now we will go on, and there is no danger to us, as those I feared might prove traitors are dead," he said, in a jubilant tone.

"You think that there is no chance, then, for a bold swimmer to escape?" asked Black Bill.

"No, indeed, for the torrent below runs through that wall of rock for several miles, here and there, dashing over a fall, and it would be impossible for a log even to pass through without being dashed to splinters."

"You know them then?"

"Yes, I was the one who organized the band."

"Indeed!"

"There are ten of them, and they were known as the Black Ten Pins."

"But I drew out and left the next officer in command, while I came down here, thinking I had struck a rich mine."

"The hole panned out well for a few weeks and then I struck bed-rock and had to try something else for a living."

"I took to the road, and, as Golden Gulch improves, the harvest will be better, while, up where the Black Band is, profit is playing out, so I will return and take command and bring them here."

"There is one duty to perform first," quietly said the woman.

"You mean to look after that Kid Glove Miner and his mine, Helen?" asked her brother.

"No, for they will keep."

"I refer to the laws of the Black Band."

"Ah, yes."

"My sister knows that the law I made for the band was that any officer in command might be challenged by any one to fight a duel for his position, and he dared not refuse."

"I know that the captain is a man by the name of Duke, and the men fear him as they do the devil."

"I will have to go to the retreat, challenge him, and thus gain control."

"If you kill him?" suggested Black Bill.

"Oh, yes, there will be no trouble about that," was the confident reply, and Blonde Bill continued:

"The second officer you will have to challenge and fight, if you wish to step into his shoes."

"I have no objection," coolly said Black Bill.

"Then, to the Black Band we go, and the booty we carry will be thrown into the common pool for all."

"And you intend, if successful, to have the band come to the vicinity of Golden Gulch?"

"By all means, for they are to run a daily stage through now, two of the mines have been formed into stock companies, and there will be a great deal of wealth pass to and fro over the roads, so that we will have a rich harvest."

"Will you rob the mines?"

"There is one that I have my eye upon which I will get possession of in some way, for it is a rich one."

"I tried to get it in various ways, but the man who has it is not one to be frightened off and he still holds on."

"You should kill him."

"Not yet, for I have plenty of time to do that, after our other little schemes fail."

"May I ask to what mine you refer?"

"You know it well, for it was once your own."

"Ha! The Elgin mine?"

"The same."

"Curses upon me, for letting it go!" savagely said Black Bill.

"Oh! you were a fool certainly, for it is the richest paying dirt in these mountains."

"I always was a fool," was the frank response as the man turned away cursing his luck.

"Well, you'll get over your foolish ways if we hang together—"

"Thank you, I do not care to hang with you, or without you."

Blonde Bill laughed lightly, and so did his sister, while he answered:

"You take me literally; I mean if we work together, you will get over your foolish ways."

"You have met with misfortunes in life, and so have I, ay, and poor Helen here too."

"You had it all your own way for fortune and position, when you came here as the inheritor of the Elgin mine."

"But you gambled away all, and are now what you are."

"You had to fly for your life, and I helped you out of a bad scrape—"

"For which I thank you."

"Curse your thanks! I want none of them. I saw in you a man to admire for the very devil that is in you, and we jibed together well."

"Now we will continue to do so, and we will sink or swim together, Black Bill."

"There is my hand upon it."

"Then the compact is made, and Helen you are the witness."

"I am," was the low reply.

"Now," continued Blonde Bill, "we must be off, for we have a hard ride before us."

Mounting their horses, and starting the pack-animals, they set off upon their journey, riding along the ridge of the mountain, and their course watched, until they were out of sight, by Frank King, the young man whom Blonde Bill had suspected of treachery, and whom he then believed he had put out of the way forever.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CAMP OF THE BROTHERHOOD.

THE ridge upon which the retreating outlaws wended their way, on the journey to the retreat of the Black Band, was a mountain wholly sur-

rounded by precipitous sides, forming walls of rock, or banks of mountain torrents.

With craggy summits, overgrown here and there with pines and cedars, there was nothing attractive about it, excepting its grandeur and solitude, and no miner, in prospecting, would care to have a claim in a place so wild and desolate.

But Blonde Bill had discovered it, and saw in it only a safe retreat in case he should have to fly for his life.

He had daringly entered a large cavern in the valley one day, and exploring it, had come out upon the ridge.

Through that cavern he discovered that a man could ride on horseback, and having seen that the ridge across the torrent was the one upon which his cabin of Echo Gap stood, he had skillfully thrown the rope bridge, and then cruelly taken the lives of the two men who aided him in the work, that the secret might remain his own.

In his retreat the reader has seen that he cut the bridge behind him, with his followers upon it, to cover up his tracks, leaving only Black Bill, as he supposed, the possessor of the secret with his sister and himself.

A ride of several miles along the ridge brought them to a dense pine thicket, in which was visible a large hole.

Into this hole, with little difficulty, Blonde Bill rode, followed by Helen.

Then came the packhorses, and next Black Bill.

The hole, or sink, terminated in a cavern, which the leader entered, after taking a pine torch from a pack and lighting it.

Through this cavernous passageway he led on for quite a distance, the path gradually descending, until they came out into daylight once more.

But the spot was but a bowl in between rocky hills.

There was a little rivulet there, a number of trees, and quantities of velvet grass.

"Here we leave our pack-animals, for we will bar up the entrance and exit through the caverns, and they cannot get out," said Blonde Bill, dismounting.

The packs were soon taken off of the animals, and formed a barrier in the entrance to the cavern, out of which they had just emerged.

Then, crossing the plat, which was several acres in size, the outlaws cut down several small trees, and dragged them to a cavern's mouth in one end of the little valley.

"This will lead us to the valley below," said Blonde Bill.

They then made bars across the mouth of the cave, and, leading their riding horses through, put them up securely behind them.

Lighting another torch, the outlaw leader once more mounted his horse, and the three set off through the cave.

It was winding and steep in descent, while now and then very narrow and with low roofs which caused them to bend in their saddles, again it would expand into vast rotundas where a regiment could have assembled.

At length, when the air of the place began to grow oppressive to all, and the echo of their horses' hoofs resounded like thunder through the weird place, Blonde Bill threw his torch away, and daylight appeared ahead.

Out of the entrance they rode, and which narrowed down to the size of a door, and found themselves in a thicket of dwarf pines.

Following their leader, the woman and Black Bill soon saw that they were hundreds of feet below where they had been upon the ridge, and whose wall sides arose grim and threatening behind them, looking like the sides of some huge steamer stranded upon the land.

"It is just thirty miles around by this valley to Golden Gulch, and about half that distance the way we came," said Blonde Bill.

"And how far is it to where the Black Band have their retreat?" asked Black Bill.

"A score of miles, so we will call a halt for dinner and rest."

They staked their horses out, and Helen broiled some juicy venison steaks, and they sat down to the repast with the air of those who were not then hunted outlaws, and bad the stains of the blackest crimes upon their consciences.

A rest of an hour and they resumed their journey, riding at a rapid canter, for the shadows were beginning to lengthen.

Toward sunset they entered a wild and most rugged country, and were forced to go at a slow pace.

After half an hour of toiling over the rocks and along the broken trail, they suddenly came to a halt, as a man stepped out from behind a huge boulder and confronted them, his rifle at his shoulder and covering them.

"Stand!"

The word came sternly from his lips, and instantly they drew rein, while Blonde Bill threw his right hand straight up above his head, and held his left one off at arm's-length.

"Who gives the signal of the Black Brotherhood?" called out the sentinel, still keeping his rifle covering them.

"I am Blonde Bill, your former chief," was the reply.

"I recognize you; but the others?"

"My sister Helen, you should also recognize."

"I do; but the other?"

"He is known as Black Bill, and is my friend."

"Your business here?"

"To challenge Captain Duke for his position as Chief of the Black Brotherhood, and my friend here throws down the same gantlet to the officer next in rank."

"Our laws force us to admit you."

"Pass on to the camp, for you know where it is."

"At the Umbrella Rock?"

"Yes."

They passed on, the sentinel stepping back behind the boulder, while Black Bill remarked: "It would be impossible to escape from here if we wished, for see, our horses can hardly get along."

"Therein lies the safety of the retreat, for a dozen men could beat back a thousand here, once they know this pass well."

"Why, the horse I had when I was chief, went at a gallop here, after a few months' riding him up and down it; but yonder is the Umbrella Rock, and the band are in camp I see," and Blonde Bill pointed ahead to where a huge rock, small at the base, and expanding at the top, was visible ahead.

At one side of this fires were burning brightly, and a number of men were visible moving about, evidently preparing the evening meal.

Like the sentinel, Black Bill observed that they were all dressed in black, and that their faces were of the same hue, but evidently from artificial coloring.

At the sight of the strangers a cry of alarm was heard, and instantly the intruders were covered by a number of rifles, for the Black Brotherhood evidently suspected treachery.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ALLIES AT WORK.

"WELL, Mr. Hale, what do you propose to do first?" asked Frank King, after the two had become allies in the same cause.

"You mean as to hunting down Blonde Bill and those with him?"

"Yes."

"Well, it seems that we are at stand-still here, so must flank the mountain in some way to discover just where they have left it."

"No, we had better follow upon their trail."

"But how can we, King? for we have no wings to fly across this chasm."

Frank King smiled, and Red Lightning saw that he had some idea of how they were to follow the trail, so he asked:

"Do you know how it can be done?"

"Yes, for I was not idle this morning, after I saw my intended murderers ride away."

"Ah! you made some important discovery?"

"I did."

"Come and you shall see."

He led the way to the brink of the precipice, where the rope bridge still hung, and said:

"I went down that way, by the hand-ropes."

"Well, I landed on yonder narrow ledge you see below and followed it around under the side of the cliff."

"Up the stream half a mile I discovered that a rock overhung the torrent, and a tree from the other shore had, fortunately for us, fallen across so as to make a bridge."

"Good! and by crossing over the tree, we will at least be upon the other side."

"Yes."

"But can we scale the other wall of rock?"

"That is to be found out; but you know this is a land of remarkable caverns and underground caverns, and when torn up by the force of the wind, the roots of the tree left exposed a cave, which I noticed ran upward, and through it passed a small rivulet, as from a spring."

"Now I believe, if we follow that tunnel-way, it will bring us out upon the summit of the ridge somewhere."

"We can but try it," was the hopeful answer, and Red Lightning promptly swung himself over the edge of the cliff and by means of the bridge and hand-rope, readily descended the eighty feet to the narrow ledge of rock.

There he stood, with not a foot of space to cling to, and the torrent roaring far below him, while Frank King followed him down the bridge with slow and cautious movement.

"You have a cool head, King, and you need it to make this descent," said Red Lightning, as the young man reached his side.

"Yes, it is a perilous trip, and as we go around this cliff on the narrow ledge we will find it equally so," and the young man led the way around the wall of rock, slowly followed by his companion.

A walk of some little distance, and in fearful danger, for a slip of the foot, or a loss of presence of mind, would have hurled either of them into certain death, and they came to where the ledge widened.

Then it ran downward, and terminated in a huge boulder, beneath which the torrent had worn its way, until one could have sprung across to the other shore, though the end would have been fatal.

But just here the huge pine had fallen, catch-

ing on the point of the rock, and, at an angle of forty-five degrees, afforded a safe means of getting over.

"I made this trip, as I told you, this morning, and so I'll go first," said Frank King, and he sprung nimbly upon the branches of the tree and then began to clamber down the huge trunk.

Red Lightning closely followed him, and at last the two stood at the base of the tree, and beheld the cave, out of which trickled the tiny stream.

Examining it closely the miner said:

"I believe it has an opening above."

"At any rate we will soon know, for, fortunately I brought some pine-knots along with me."

One of these was quickly lighted, and the two men entered the cavern.

It was damp and chill, and the flooring was wet; but they went boldly forward, and as they saw how the passageway rose before them, they were encouraged with their idea that it must lead to the ridge above.

A walk of a quarter of a mile, perhaps, still following the rivulet's course, and with the tunnel narrowing and widening at times, and they came to the head of the spring.

It came from a huge bowl in the rock, and bubbled up strong and clear.

"Out with your torch, for I see the glimmer of daylight ahead," cried Frank King.

Instantly he stepped forward, and turning a rocky corner, stood in the mouth of a huge cave.

They could hardly restrain themselves from giving a shout, as they saw that they had indeed come out upon the top of the ridge.

Taking their bearings, they made their way in the direction where they felt the bridge must have landed upon that side, and soon after came in sight of the spot.

"Ha! ha! now we have found their trail," cried Frank King, as he pointed to the hoof-tracks at their feet.

"And here is where they stood and saw those poor fellows die unmoved?" said Red Lightning.

"Yes, Blonde Bill stood here, for there are the ropes cut you see."

"Black Bill leaned against that tree, and that beautiful wretch stood just there, all unheeding the pitiful cries for mercy."

"Ay, and I would have been among the dead, had I not known Blonde Bill's treacherous nature," firmly said the young man.

"And you are sure that they did not see that you escaped?"

"No, the horses hid me from their view, and even the men did not notice that I was not with them."

"But I have something to eat here, so suppose we have dinner."

Red Lightning also unslung his haversack, and the two sat down to their frugal meal, to which their success thus far added a relish.

Soon, however, they were on the move again, and Red Lightning had no difficulty in following the trail, for expecting no pursuit, in fact, believing pursuit impossible, Blonde Bill had made no effort to cover up his tracks.

Coming to the sink in the ground, which soon disclosed the entrance to a cavern, the two men halted.

Was this not the retreat of the outlaws?

Had they not halted here?

Such were the questions they asked themselves, and then they set about answering them as best they could.

"If they had halted in this cavern, I think," said Red Lightning, "they would have left their horses outside in my opinion, for certainly they did not think that they had aught to fear."

"No, they must have gone on, and this cavern, like the one we ascended by, may lead to the valley."

"I believe you are right, sir," answered Frank King, whose manner toward the miner was always most respectful.

"Then I will light a torch and we will push on."

"I am ready," answered the young outlaw, and the two were soon following the windings of the cavern, the miner closely following the trail left by the horses, aided by the pine torch which he carried in his hand.

After awhile Red Lightning paused and said:

"King, keep on ahead a little way, so that if daylight appears we can see it in time."

"A good idea," answered the young man, and he had not taken a dozen steps when he called out:

"Light ahead!"

"A torch-light, or daylight?" asked Red Lightning, shielding his own torch as much as he could.

"Daylight," was the answer.

Instantly the miner extinguished his torch, and then before them was visible the glimmer of daylight.

Cautiously then they moved forward, and soon came to a stand-still, as they confronted the barrier of pack-saddles.

"They are here," whispered Frank King.

"Evidently, so we must act with care," was the low response.

They waited for a long time, hoping to see some one, or to hear voices.

But they were disappointed.

Suddenly they saw a horse come slowly into sight.

He was without saddle or bridle, and was cropping the grass as he went along.

"It is one of the packhorses," said Frank King.

Then another came into view, and another, until the hiding men felt confident that they were at the camp of the outlaws.

"There is nothing to do but wait until night, and then we can reconnoiter," said Red Lightning.

"Yes, for if we go beyond this barrier we will doubtless be seen," was the answer.

Retreating into the cave Red Lightning threw his blanket down upon the hard rock flooring of the cavern, and they laid down to get what rest they could.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TWIN TERRORS.

THE very instant that the Black Brotherhood threw their rifles to their shoulders, with seeming hostile intent, Blonde Bill at once gave the same signal which he had given to the sentinel.

"Ha! it is Captain Bill, pards," cried a loud voice.

"But he comes not alone," said another, and the rifles were still held at a cover.

"Who is it?" asked a tall, heavily bearded man, wearing a black mask, which he had evidently just put on, and he came from behind the Umbrella Rock.

"It is our old cap'n, sir, and he has friends with him," was the answer.

"Ah, yes, I recognize him, and they are but three.

"Come in, Captain Bill," he called out, while he said in a low tone:

"What in Satan's name does he want here, I wonder?

"Well, there are but three of them, so we need fear nothing.

"Ah! one is that lovely sister of his," and the man, who was the captain of the Brotherhood, advanced to meet Blonde Bill and his companions as they halted.

"Ah, Bill, I am glad to see you; and you too, Miss Helen, for it has been many a long day since I set eyes upon your sweet face. Let me aid you."

As he stepped forward, after grasping the hand of Blonde Bill, to aid Helen dismount, she sprung lightly to the ground, refusing his professed assistance with a cold bow.

"Captain Duke, this is my friend Black Bill," said Blonde Bill.

"I am glad to meet you, sir; but let me ask you to my cabin, Miss Helen—and here, men, some of you look after these horses."

The outlaw captain led the way around Umbrella Rock to a small cabin, into which he ushered the woman, while he placed seats outside for himself and guests, near a fire upon which was cooking a by no means uninviting supper.

"Now tell me how matters are about Golden Gulch?" he said, addressing Blonde Bill, who answered simply:

"Booming."

"So I have heard; and it is just the contrary with us."

"So I have also heard, Duke; but Golden Gulch is improving, the mines are panning out better each day, more people are coming in, and we have a stage in and out every day."

"Then you must be thriving, Bill, for I heard that you took to the road again when mining got dull."

"I did."

"And are captain of the band known as Tax-gatherers of the Overland?"

"I was."

"Ah! you have given it up then?"

"Yes; I have come back to my first love."

"No! But then you know the laws of the Brotherhood well, having made them."

"Yes, if you mean that they can number no more than ten?"

"Yes, that is what I mean; and I am sorry, for I would like to have you and your friend, not to speak of Miss Helen's cheerful face among us."

Just then Helen came from the cabin, having thrown aside her riding-skirt, and joined them at the fire.

"I will not keep masked before you, Miss Helen," said the outlaw captain, and he took off the black shield that covered his face so completely.

The act displayed a face that was stamped with guilt from forehead to chin.

It was a face to hate, to shun, and it showed the character of the man.

When Blonde Bill had left the band, this man had stepped to the front as captain, and no one dared dispute the rank with him, so he became leader.

His brother, fully his equal in guilt, had been

made next in command, and two men had been enlisted from Miners' Haven to bring the number up to ten.

Under these two men the Black Brotherhood had become the terror of the mountains, and if any of them were killed, recruits were easily obtainable from the lawless slaves.

"Yes, I know the laws of the band, Duke, and I am not one to suggest that they shall be broken; but I did think that the Brotherhood would do better in a new field, and hence my visit to you."

"Ah, you want us to go with you to the vicinity of Golden Gulch?" eagerly said the outlaw captain.

"I want the band to go, Duke."

"I do not exactly understand you."

"Well, you must know that one law of the Brotherhood permits no man to keep the leadership who does not hold himself in readiness to defend it with his life, against any man who may seek the position?"

"Yes, I do know that law, and, if you look about the band, you will find but few of the men you knew in it that are now here."

"Some of them have been shot in gold-hunting, but two of them wanted to be captain and challenged me to meet them and defend my rights."

The man spoke in a hoarse voice, and with a look that was fiendish and defiant, for he seemed to comprehend now why Blonde Bill had come back to this band.

But in the easiest manner possible, Blonde Bill replied:

"That is just what I have come to do, Duke."

"Challenge me to defend my title?"

"Yes."

"You are a dead-shot, Bill, and a good hand with the knife; but surely you are not such a fool as to pit yourself against me in a fight of life and death?"

"I am just such a fool, Duke, and here is another, who will challenge that brute of a brother of yours."

"No!" and the outlaw leader turned his burning gaze upon Black Bill, who seemed not in the least disconcerted.

"It is true, Duke; we have come to challenge you and your brother Rafe to fight us."

"Well, I have half a mind to oblige you, and Rafe will do as I say," sneered the man.

"You will have a whole mind to do so, for you must meet us."

"Not if we do not care to do so, as you are not members of the Brotherhood."

"We will leave it to the men, Duke, as to whether you can back out upon that score."

The man sprung to his feet in a rage, while he said, savagely:

"Understand me! I do not wish to back out, for if you belonged to Satan's band, I would meet you!"

"So put it down, and Rafe will do as I do."

"Now let us have some supper, and to-morrow we will settle this matter."

Just then there walked up to the group a man strangely like the outlaw captain in form, and also in face, for he removed a black mask as he saw that his brother had taken his off.

"Ah, Rafe, here are old friends in Blonde Bill and Miss Helen and a stranger of whom you have heard, for he is Black Bill, of Golden Gulch," said Captain Duke.

Rafe greeted them all in a half-surly way, keeping his eyes particularly upon Helen, and then sat down at the table where they were to have their supper.

"Blonde Bill and his pard, Rafe, have taken a fancy to be Grand Moguls of the Brotherhood, and as they offer their challenge, I have told them they could be accommodated," continued Captain Duke.

"Every time," was the short and decisive answer of the second ruffian.

"I guess they have an idea that the Twin Terrors have forgotten their cunning, when they seek to tackle us—Have this bird, Miss Helen, for it is done to a turn, and, in honor of this occasion, I will open a few bottles of good old wine that we got from an army commissary wagon on the way to the fort a few days ago."

"Yes, and it helps us to set a good supper before you, too," and Captain Duke pointed to some crackers, sardines, bacon and other articles which had been found in the army wagon.

Under the influence of the wine the supper passed off pleasantly, every one seeming to eat with a relish that the strange circumstances of their meeting failed to dampen.

After the meal was ended Captain Duke said:

"Now, Blonde Bill, we will call the men up, fires shall be lighted, and we will get to work to see if you have not made a mistake to come here with your pard, trying to step into the shoes of Rafe and myself."

"We are ready whenever you are, Duke," was the cool reply, as Blonde Bill lighted a cigar with an air of reckless indifference.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WOMAN'S WORK.

ANY one, at first glance, seeing the two men known as the Twin Terrors, would have pronounced them splendid-looking men.

They possessed forms that were large, sinewy

and with great broad shoulders that denoted strength of an uncommon order.

They were dressed in black pants and jacket, wore constantly out of camp their black masks, and, armed to the teeth, were a dangerous couple to meet.

Of the same size, they also looked strangely alike.

Their beards were black and worn long, their hair was of the same hue and fell nearly to their belts, and their eyes were piercing, but vicious, treacherous and as baleful as a hyena's.

For years they had drifted about among the mines, quarreling, killing, and flying, when a place got too hot for them.

At last, driven to extremities, they had joined the Black Brotherhood of the mountains, and, upon the departure of Blonde Bill had become its leaders.

Mercy they had none of in their composition, and the men they governed hated and feared them.

When Helen had been in the camp of the Brotherhood they had both loved her, or said they did, as much as men of their kind were capable of loving.

Finding that they both could not win her, they had determined to fight a duel, and let the survivor have the prize.

But the prize ended this matter by frankly telling them she hated them both, and would kill the survivor, whichever he might be, rather than become his wife.

They were not fools, so accepted the situation.

But it was upon their account, in a measure, that caused Blonde Bill to give up his leadership of the Brotherhood and seek a home near Golden Gulch.

Such were the men whom Blonde Bill had gone to meet, and taken Black Bill with him to confront.

But Black Bill was no coward, and took matters with a coolness that charmed his companion.

As soon as the men were called, Captain Duke said in his sneering, hateful way:

"Pards, it seems that Blonde Bill here, loves you all so much that he wishes to again hold command over the Brotherhood.

"Well, you know the law, that he has to challenge me, and kill me to step into my shoes.

"And he has brought a pard along, Black Bill there, to get away with Rafe, so that the two of them can run the bard, carry them down to Golden Gulch and make loads of money.

"Of course Rafe and myself will oblige the gentlemen, and if you will build several fires, for light, we will have the ceremony over with in short order.

The men gave vent to a low cheer, which it was hard to discover was caused by hope of the death of the Twin Terrors, or those who came to fight them.

"Well, pards, what is your style of fighting?

"Rifle, revolver or knife?" asked Captain Duke, while his brother sat by, with seemingly no interest in the affair, and with his eyes, meantime, fixed upon Helen.

"We will fight with revolvers," answered Blonde Bill, with a quick look at Black Bill, who seemed inclined to select some other weapon, when Helen quickly whispered:

"Choose revolvers!"

"Revolvers will suit me," he said, quietly.

"Revolvers shall be the weapons, then."

"You use your own, gentlemen, and Rafe and myself will use some we keep for close shooting, and which never failed us yet, and I guess never will."

He glanced quickly at his visitors as he spoke to note the effect of his confident tone upon them, but they showed no sign whatever of having even heard him.

"Now what distance?" he called out.

"Ten paces," said Helen.

"Ah! I am glad to see you interested in the affair, Miss Helen."

"Perhaps you will give the word to fire?"

"With pleasure, Captain Duke," was the prompt reply.

"Is this satisfactory to you, Blonde Bill?"

"Assuredly, Duke, for I know of no one who would be better."

"And to you, sir?" and the outlaw captain turned to Black Bill, who answered:

"I am satisfied, sir."

"And what say you, Rafe?"

"She wants us both killed, and would be pleased, if we were, to know that she gave the order to fire," was the surly answer.

"And you are content for her to do so, Rafe?"

"Yes, and if I kill my man, and you kill yours, I'll fight you, Duke, for the prize."

"You forget that I have something to say there," said Helen, with her sweetest smile.

"Come, let us settle this matter," angrily said Blonde Bill, and the distance was stepped off, fires were built behind each spot where a man was to stand, so as to make it fair for all, and while the men ranged themselves in a row upon one side, Helen calmly took her stand upon the other.

"I'll get my weapons, and then we'll be ready," said Duke, and he entered the cabin.

Soon he returned with a pair of elegantly-

mounted revolvers in a rosewood case, the lid being open.

"Here, Rafe, take your weapon, and it is ready, for I cleaned up and reloaded them both this afternoon," said Captain Duke.

His brother took up one of the weapons, glanced at it closely, and said, shortly:

"I am ready."

"Then take your stand there, sir," said Helen, assuming control of the affair, and she pointed to a position near her.

"Do you say for me to stand there?" asked Rafe, with a grim smile.

"I do."

"Then I'll take the opposite position, for I am sure your quick eyes have detected some advantage in it," he said.

"As you please," she answered.

He walked to the position he had selected, and calling to Black Bill, she said:

"Will you take the stand which that fellow was afraid of?"

He stepped to the spot with a bow, and stood pistol in hand.

"Now, Captain Duke, select your own position!" she said.

"I will stand over here next to Rafe," and he walked to the spot in a line with his brother, and about five feet from him.

"Brother, you have no choice," and Helen motioned to the last stand, and quickly Blonde Bill toed the mark.

"I will give the command according to the code of the Southern *duellos*," she said, calmly.

"What is that?" asked Duke.

"I will ask if you are ready, and, upon a nod of assent, will say fire!"

"Then I will count *One, two, three!*"

"Between the word one and the word three you are to fire."

"The man who fires before the word *one*, and after the word *three*, I will kill," and she drew a revolver from her belt and cocked it.

"Say, Duke, we have to fight according to rule this time," muttered Rafe, and his brother answered:

"Blast the woman! I was too quick in selecting her to run the affair."

The four men now stood, their revolvers in their right hands, and their lefts behind them, while Helen stood midway between them, but off out of range.

"Gentlemen, are you ready?" called out Helen, in ringing tones, and without the slightest atom of fear visible upon her beautiful face.

They all nodded assent, and then raising her own weapon, she continued in the same distinct, firm voice:

"Fire! One!"

The four revolvers flashed forth as many shots together, and almost as one weapon resounded the combined report.

And without a word, or moan even, the Twin Terrors sunk in their tracks.

In their foreheads were the marks of their foes' bullets, and standing still in their tracks were the two men who had fired with such deadly aim.

An instant of silence followed, and then Blonde Bill wheeled toward the Black Brotherhood, and said:

"Men, have we won our rank as captain and lieutenant of this band?"

A cheer was the answer, and a voice cried:

"And yer hev done us a favor ter boot, cap'n, fer them two was ther devil an' his brother."

"And they would have killed both you and Will, had I not drawn the bullets from the pistols I knew they would use, when I was in the cabin," said Helen in a low tone to Black Bill, as she walked past him and entered the little cabin, seemingly well pleased with her work.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE CAVERN.

I LEFT Red Lightning and his young comrade asleep in the cavern, waiting until darkness before they reconnoitered the position where they believed the outlaws were encamped.

The miner awakened just at twilight, and quickly aroused his companion.

Then they cautiously approached the barricade of pack-saddles and looked out into the inclosure.

They could get a view of the little vale, surrounded by its walls of rock; but no camp fire met their gaze.

Here and there a horse was feeding, but no human being was in sight.

"I fear they have gone, King," said Red Lightning, lightly leaping over the barrier and stepping out into the open space.

"It certainly seems so," answered his comrade joining him.

"Then we have lost time; but my word for it they will return, for they have not deserted these horses, or left this plunder."

"Come, we will take in the situation."

Cautiously they then went around the little vale, and saw that the horses were quietly feeding, and enjoying their rest immensely.

They crossed the rivulet, where there was plenty of water for the animals, and soon came

upon the entrance to the cavern on the opposite side to the one through which they had come.

The freshly cut trees, serving as bars to close the entrance told the story of the outlaws having departed after having penned the horses up for a day or so.

"They have gone off somewhere, King, but will surely return here."

"We can see where this cavern leads, and then can camp in it and await their return."

"It is the best we can do," was the answer, and climbing over the barrier the two men set to work to light their pine torches.

With these in hand they started on their tour of exploration, going slowly, and following the hoof-marks of the three horses, which Red Lightning's keen eyes had discerned in the entrance to the cavern.

Presently the miner halted and then said quickly:

"Listen!"

A sound came to their ears, and from a passageway branching off from the one upon which they were.

"Come, it seems like men in conversation from the sound; let us go that way."

They followed the passage for some distance, and from it branched off into others, still led by the loud sound which appeared to be human voices.

"Stop!"

Red Lightning spoke sternly, and then after an instant of silence, cried:

"It is not the voice of a human being, and we will have a worse foe to fight."

"Back! for this dark hole is no place in which to meet a grizzly."

"Ah! is it so bad as that?" asked Frank King.

But, as the words left his lips there came a fierce growl, and then the patter of heavy feet, and the torches shone upon a huge bear rushing upon them.

"Fire true, or we are lost!" calmly said Red Lightning and their revolvers flashed together.

But, as they did so a second fierce growl was heard, and then followed a thud which sent Frank King reeling against the miner, and knocked the torch from his hand.

It was a moment of terrible peril, for the miner felt his comrade sink at his feet insensible or dead, he knew not which, and beheld, almost upon him two huge monsters of the mountains.

But, even in that dread moment his nerve did not forsake him, and thrusting his torch above his head with his left hand, he aimed quickly at the flashing eyes of the nearest bear and two rapid reports followed.

Amid the howl of rage and pain that followed, he turned his weapon upon the second monster, and again came two deafening reports, for the corridors of the cavern sent back a thousand booming echoes.

That his shots had taken effect, blinding both of the brutes, and bringing down one in death-agony the miner saw, and quickly he dragged the form of his companion out of harm's way, and then returned to complete his work.

His torch gave him good aim, and a few more shots ended the death-struggle of both brutes.

"Well, that was the closest shave I ever had," he muttered grimly, as he wiped the sweat from his face.

"Now to see what harm they have done poor King, whom I know did not see the brute that gave him that savage blow."

He went over to where his comrade lay, and kneeling beside him gazed into his face, while he put his fingers upon his pulse.

"Not dead, thank Heaven!"

"Ah! this arm, and a rib or two are broken."

Suddenly he started, and then bending over nearer gazed intently into the upturned face.

After a moment of silence he said in a low, earnest tone:

"My God! this is fearful, and I hardly know what to do."

"But I am no coward, to yield now, in spite of the odds against me, and I will not."

He poured water from his canteen into his hand and bathed the face of his wounded friend, and soon the eyes opened and met his own.

"Where am I?" was the low question.

"Safe."

"But I suffer so."

"My head goes round and round, and my arm and side pain me greatly."

"Yes, for the bear gave you a fearful blow."

"Ah yes! the bear! where is it?"

"There they both lie, dead."

"Then there were two?"

"Yes, one of them neither of us saw until he struck you."

"But you are badly hurt, that is to be so far away from help, yet you must keep up a stout heart and all will come well."

"I will; but I cannot raise thi arm."

"It is broken."

"Ah me! and my side pains so."

"I think a rib or two is fractured there, but I will get you to Golden Gulch all right if your leg even was broken, so cheer up— Ah! too bad! too bad!"

The last words were wrung from the lips of the brave man by suddenly seeing his torch go

out, and he knew that he had not another one with him.

Certainly it was a fearful position to be in, and one at which the stoutest heart might surely quail and give up hope.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LOST IN THE CAVERN.

HORACE HALE was no man to give up in despair while there was a chance for life.

He had, in the awful moment when Frank King lay at his feet, and the two huge monsters of the mountains were rushing upon him, held the torch above his head with a hand of iron, and catching the gleam of their blazing eyes reflected in the light, had sent his bullets sure, and blinded them both.

There had been no quiver of a muscle to destroy his aim, and he had triumphed.

But, to find himself in an unknown cavern, alone with a comrade who was sorely wounded, in darkness that could be felt, was certainly a fearful ordeal.

But he pondered an instant, and remembered that the torch which Frank King had, when struck by the bear, had been knocked from his hand and put out.

Instantly he began the search for it.

Every inch of the rocky flooring was felt over carefully, and the heavy bodies of the brutes were moved aside, for he thought the torch might be beneath one of them.

At last, when he had almost given up hope of finding it, his hand touched it.

Grasping it, he drew out a match, and instantly a light blazed through the dark cavern.

There near him lay the savage brutes dead, and over in the opening of a rocky passageway he beheld his wounded comrade.

That he suffered greatly, Red Lightning knew well, but not a murmur came from him.

"Come, we must find our way out while this torch lasts," he said.

He aided the wounded man to rise, and just as they took the first step the torch flickered out.

Then they knew that there was no more hope for light, as the fat of the pine had wholly burned out.

What to do, neither of them knew for a minute.

But Red Lightning said after an instant of thought.

"We need not remain still, for in that way we can only stay here and die."

"Do you think you can walk, with my aid?"

"Oh yes, my running-gear is all right," said the young man hopefully.

Placing one arm around him to support him, and feeling his way with the other, Red Lightning moved away in the direction which he thought was right to lead them by the passageway which they had come.

For a long time they wandered along, and at last Frank King said that he must rest.

"Do so, for we cannot be far from the main tunnelway now," was the answer.

"Here, lie down upon my blanket."

Red Lightning stooped to spread the blanket, and he started, grasped something with his iron grieve, and Frank King heard a dull thud.

"What is it?" he said.

"I thought we had run upon another bear, and we have; but it is one that I killed."

"Then we are back where we started from, after all these weary wanderings!"

"We certainly are; but come, I'll make use of the bear, and, with my blanket you can be comfortable."

"Then I will see what I can do to set your broken arm."

Frank King sunk down upon the blanket, and leaned back against the huge body of the bear.

"This is comfortable, at any rate," he said.

"You had a stick in your hand when we came here?"

"Yes, I threw it down when we first sighted the bear."

"I will find it," and away the miner crept upon his search.

After a long time the stick was found, and with his bowie-knife, Red Lightning made some splints. Then he took his rawhide lariat, which he wore hanging over one shoulder, and began to unravel it.

As soon as he had gotten the thongs separated, and of a sufficient length, he soaked them in the pool of blood which had flowed from the dead brutes.

"Now I'll have to draw your sleeve off," he said quietly.

"All right, sir, I am in your hands," was the cheery reply.

The arm was bared, and with care Red Lightning examined the fracture.

"It is just midway between the socket of the shoulder and the elbow, and is, I am glad to discover, but a simple fracture, and I can readily set it."

"You understand surgery then?"

"Yes, I made it a study from pleasure simply, and it has often served me well."

"Now, let me knit these ends of bone, and I will soon have you all right."

The operation was a painful one, but no moan came from the set lips of the young man, and

the arm was carefully bandaged with strips torn from the hunting-shirt of Red Lightning.

"Now we'll see what damage has been done to your side," he said.

"You mean *feel*," was the reply.

"Yes, but, to use an Irishism, my fingers will soon see the trouble."

"Ah! it is not as bad as I feared, for there is but one rib fractured, and I will do the best I can for that."

"Here, rest just so, please, and I will not be long."

Bandages were then applied, and again no groan of pain; but Frank King fell back against the body of the bear when the work was done.

"Now, you must rest."

"And you, sir?"

"Will rest, too, for we both need it."

In a short while they were both asleep, Frank King having been tenderly wrapped in the blanket of the miner, who had the bear for a pillow.

How long they slept neither of them knew; but that it was a long, long time they felt confident, for both were refreshed.

There was still dense darkness about them, and they could not tell whether it was day or night.

"Now we must have our breakfast," said the miner.

"Or dinner, or supper, for we know not the hour."

"True; but as the last was our supper, we'll call this breakfast."

"But how do you feel?"

"I am suffering," was the reply.

"I do not doubt it; but are you easier than before I set your arm?"

"Yes, the pain is different now."

"Then it was sharp and stinging, but now it is dull and aching."

"I have here some cold broiled venison, and a few crackers."

"Then, though I am not a drinking man, I always carry a flask of good brandy and a swallow will strengthen you."

"I am not hungry, but I feel that something to eat will strengthen me," was the reply.

In silence and darkness they munched their food, and then Red Lightning said:

"Now we are lost, that is evident, and we must find our way out of this cavern."

"I believe that without me you could find daylight."

"Yes, and I'll do it with you."

"No, you go on the hunt, and then you can return for me, when you gather a few torches."

"Not I, for I might never find my way back."

"We find our way out together, or we die together."

"It looks like a hopeless task."

"Don't get blue, for I have an idea to light our way."

"Well?"

"I shall set those hairy brutes on fire, and while they are burning, we will have light to find our way a long way off from this spot."

"Bravo! what an idea."

"Then, when that light dies out, I will flash powder every now and then to see where we are."

"You are a man among men, sir."

"Thank you."

"Now we will make the start."

"Let me aid you!"

Frank King needed aid, for he rose to his feet with difficulty.

"Now I'll light my grizzly lantern," said Red Lightning.

He applied a match to the two shaggy hides of the huge bears, and instantly they flamed.

"Come! while the lamp of light holds out to burn," he cried, moving away and supporting his comrade.

"Those burning bears will light our way for awhile through this Hades, and Heaven aid us to find our way out," added Red Lightning as the two walked off at a rapid pace.

The shaggy hides burned finely for awhile, and, when at last the light died out, the two men were a long way off, following a cavernous passage which Red Lightning felt sure had been the one they had come by.

When the light from the burning bears no longer aided them, Red Lightning placed a small quantity of powder on the rocky floor and Frank King applied a match to it, while the miner looked out ahead as to their course.

In the instant's flash he saw ahead, and on they moved.

And thus they went, by flash after flash, until time sped by, and the wounded man was forced to rest once more, and both had to confess in their own minds that they were lost, for the way out seemed no nearer than before.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

AFTER a long rest, another meal, and which emptied the haversack of food, another flash of powder illuminated the cavern, and the two men started upon their way.

Flash after flash carried them along, until at last Frank King said quietly:

"I have but one more match."

"Keep it, and we will find our way along in the darkness," was the reply.

A few more steps, feeling their way, when suddenly the miner halted and said, in a low tone:

"Hark!"

Instantly to the mind of the wounded man came the thought of another wild beast and a death-struggle in the dark.

But no, the sound was different.

"What is it?"

"The fall of hoofs upon the rocky flooring," was the low reply.

Still as death they stood and listened, and louder and louder grew the sound.

Soon there was a flash of light, and then they beheld where they were.

"We are in the main tunnel," eagerly said the miner.

"Yes, and they are coming this way."

They both now saw the flash of torches, and then far down the tunnel appeared in sight a band of horsemen.

"Come, we must hasten on."

"I cannot," was the low reply.

"I will carry you."

"No; you can easily escape, so leave me."

"What! Do you take me for a coward?"

"Forgive me, but I am unable to move almost."

Instantly the miner turned to raise the wounded man in his arms, but the act gave him such pain that he was forced to cry out.

"Then, here we stay."

"See, this rock juts out; and they may pass us by."

"If they do discover us, I have twelve shots here, and I never miss!" Red Lightning said in a low tone that was not in the least boastful.

Back in the slight crevice of the rocky wall they crouched, while the horsemen drew nearer.

One in advance carried a flaming torch, which made the dark shadows of the cavern dance about like weird giants.

Nearer and nearer they came, and behind the leader rode a woman.

"It is Blonde Bill—yes, there is his sister," whispered Frank King.

"Yes; and Black Bill follows behind her."

"But who are the others?"

"The Black Brotherhood," was the low reply.

"Ha! I have heard of them as a band of outlaws infesting the country above."

"Yes; and Blonde Bill has leagued himself with them again, for once he was their captain."

"He is masked, I see."

"Yes; and so is Lady Helen and Black Bill."

"The others have their faces blacked."

"Their hearts are blacker!" muttered Red Lightning, crouching closer down in the crevice and with a cocked revolver in each hand.

Soon the flashing torch was almost abreast of them, and the suspense was fearful.

Would its light fall upon them in their hiding-place?

Would not some keen eye detect them?

Or, not suspecting a foe near, would they be negligent and pass them by?

"Ho, Black Bill, do you not notice that peculiar smell in the cavern?" called out Blonde Bill, as he was abreast of his hiding foe.

"Yes, it smells like burning cloth," was the answer.

"Exactly."

"Could we have dropped a spark that set something on fire when we passed through?"

"There was nothing to set on fire, Will."

"Perhaps foes have been here and burned the booty, and the wind has blown the smoke into the cavern," said the woman.

"No; I do not fear foes here, for they can never find this retreat; but I will press on and see all the same."

"Come, let us ride faster."

The torch waned more rapidly, the shadows danced more wildly, and the danger from the light was passed.

Then followed the band of the Black Brotherhood, each man leading a packhorse, and several of them a riding-animal besides.

At last they

strike into one of the branching corridors, as the hoof-falls were no longer heard.

At last that sound died away in the distance; but still he pressed on.

"I must rest," said Frank King.

Just then the quick eye of the miner detected a gleam ahead.

"Come a little further, for I see light ahead. See! do you not see the reflection of the camp-fires, which they have built in the little valley?"

"Yes, and I can go on now; but what then?"

"I will leave you here while I reconnoiter."

They continued on until the whole mouth of the cavern was brightly visible, and the rocks and trees in the valley were lighted up by the camp fires.

"Now I will leave you here."

"Here, lie down on my blanket, and be as comfortable as you can under the circumstances."

So saying, he left his comrade and moved forward to the entrance of the cave.

The bars were in place, and looking out he saw that several camp-fires had been built in the other end of the vale, and the forms of the outlaws were gathered about them.

The horses had been unsaddled, and turned loose, and were rolling, or moving about in their enjoyment of their freedom.

As he seemed to get a better view, his feet struck something close to the rocky wall.

Stooping, he picked up half a dozen pine torches, tied together.

"Ha! this is a glorious find," he muttered.

"Now I will see what can be done about getting a horse."

"It is night, and over twenty-four hours must have passed since we entered the cavern, for a day has certainly gone by, and darkness come again.

"Well, once I can get a horse, and we will be fixed."

He watched the moving animals, and, as one drew near the bars he made his lariat fast, and coiled the other end to throw.

"I think these logs will hold him. At any rate I must try."

Nearer and nearer came the animal, cropping the grass as he came, and crouching in the cavern was Red Lightning, ready to throw the fatal lariat.

Nearer and nearer the unsuspecting animal approached, and then was latched the coil.

Over the head of the beast settled the noose, and with a snort and spring, he attempted to bound away, but was checked by the heavy logs, though several of them were pulled down with a loud noise.

Quickly the miner drew in the slack of the lariat, and spoke soothing words to the horse, which once caught, was now quiet.

"I have gotten a good animal by chance, at any rate," muttered the miner, and he was about to lead him over the fallen logs into the cavern, when he saw a man rapidly approaching the spot.

Instantly he made the lariat fast, and once more crouched down to see what would happen.

Straight toward the cavern entrance came the man, and, as he drew near, seeing the horse, he called out:

"Oh! I see what you are after, you accursed brute."

"Not content with plenty of good grass and cool water, you are breaking into that dark hole."

"Well, I'll have to have help to put those logs up."

As he spoke he turned toward the camp-fires, and the word of call to his comrades was just upon his lips, when a grieve was upon his throat which choked back all utterance, while into his side sunk the blade of a knife.

Once, twice, thrice, the keen weapon was driven into the heart, and then the body was laid gently down upon the ground, for the first stroke for life had slain the outlaw.

Without an instant's hesitation the miner led the horse into the cavern, and then set to work to put up the logs as they were before.

Whatever the outlaw might have thought of the heavy logs, Red Lightning certainly handled them with remarkable ease, and did not call upon the Brotherhood for help.

This work done, he threw the body into the cavern out of sight, sprung lightly over the barrier, and seizing his bundle of torches, started back through the dismal passage, leading his captured horse.

By calling out gently he soon found Frank King, who answered him.

"Well?" asked the wounded man.

"Luck is on our side."

"What?"

"I have a good horse here with me, though he has no saddle and bridle; but we won't be too particular."

"No, indeed; but how did you catch him?"

"He chanced to come near the entrance to the cave, and I lariated him."

"I thought I had most of your lariat on me!"

"No, I had enough to catch him with."

"Come, I'll put the blanket on for a saddle and aid you to mount."

"Ah! your gloved hand is all wet."

"Yes, it is blood, I guess."

"Blood! did you hurt yourself?" quickly asked Frank King.

"No, I killed an outlaw," was the reply.

"Ha! did he attack you?"

"No, he was curious, came to see what the noise was, when the horse pulled the log bars down, and to save ourselves, I drove my knife into his heart."

"You did right; but it was not Blonde Bill?" quickly and eagerly asked Frank King.

"No, indeed; but one of the gang."

"Now, we must be off."

"But how?"

"Through the cavern."

"How will we find our way?"

"I secured a bundle of torches, and you have a match."

"One."

"That won't fail us."

"At any rate we must chance it."

"But I will not light it now, until we have gotten out of sight of any one who may be at the entrance to the cavern."

With considerable difficulty on account of his intense suffering, Frank King was gotten upon the back of the patient horse, and made as comfortable on his blanket-saddle as possible.

Then the miner led the way for some little distance, and at last when he dared not trust himself in the darkness further, halted and said:

"Give me the last hope, please."

"The match?"

"Yes."

It was handed over as carefully as though it had been a precious stone, and then it was drawn softly upon the rock.

Both watched, and held their breath as it failed to ignite.

But another time and the brimstone ignited and the blaze came.

Instantly the fat heart of one of the pine torches was held into the tiny flame, and a light shot up into the dark recesses of the cavern.

"Now we are safe," said the miner, cheerily, and he led the horse on, following the trail through the main tunnel.

The way seemed interminable, but at last the cool air fanned their faces, and they knew that they must be near the end.

Shielding the torch after a little way further had been gone over, they beheld the opening, with stars gleaming in a clear sky.

A few more steps, and they were out of the cavern.

"Do you know where we are?" asked the miner, as he saw that the cavern came out upon the side of a wooded hill, and could catch glimpses through the thicket of pines and cedars of a large valley below.

"Yes, this must be Paradise Valley, and which is also called Hunters' Paradise," answered Frank King.

"I confess I am not very well acquainted with the surroundings of Golden Gulch."

"But I have heard Tempest Tom, a hunter, speak of Paradise Valley, and it is, I believe, a little over thirty miles from the Gulch."

"Yes, about that far."

"I rode through it once with Blonde Bill and his men, when the Vigilantes were chasing us."

"It is a long ride for me."

"We'll soon make it," was the confident reply.

Down the hillside the miner then led the horse, and turning into the valley, set off at a brisk walk, declining, as Frank King requested, to put double weight upon the animal.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DOCTOR'S RETURN TO GOLDEN GULCH.

BACK to Golden Gulch we must go to see how matters are progressing there with other characters of our story, for it will not do to forget that there are friends there in whom we hold deep interest.

Frank Powell, true to his promise to Red Lightning, went to the cabin of the miner up in the mountains, and found affairs there as had been represented, for the four dead members of the Seven Stars band were lying in ghastly repose, awaiting the last act of the drama—that of burial.

This work was very speedily done by the doctor and his companion, and no prayers were wasted over the dead criminals.

Entering the cabin, they passed the night there, but early the following morning the doctor went down to have a look at the mine, leaving Lanky to cook breakfast.

To his surprise, he saw tracks there that had been very recently made.

"Hale left home early yesterday morning, so could not have been in the mine since the day before, and I'll wager my diploma on it that these tracks were made last night," he said, as he examined the tracks closely.

Going to where he knew that the miner kept his tools, he found them secure.

Then he returned to the mine and again set to work looking about him.

For a long time he searched carefully, pick-

ing up here and there a small sprinkling of gold and the time seemingly lost in deep reverie.

"Well, I have my theory," he muttered as he left the mine.

And he added, as he walked back towards the cabin:

"To-night I will solve it."

He found that Lanky had prepared a tempting breakfast from the stores found in the cabin, for the miner always lived well, and after finishing the repast, he secured the cabin, and mounting their horses the two set off upon the trail to Golden Gulch.

Many a cheer and kind word greeted the doctor as he rode by the camps, and up the street to the Gold Brick, and, upon drawing rein before the hotel he was welcomed with a shout and two-score invitations to drink in one breath.

"Lanky will do the drinking for me, boys; but I have work to do," he said pleasantly as he strode on into the hotel.

"Any news of Kid Gloves, or as the boys call him now, Red Lightning?" asked Major Simon Suggs, as he met the doctor.

"Oh no, for as you doubtless know, major, we left him at the deserted outlaw camp."

"Hope he'll turn up all right."

"Yes, he'll take care of himself; but I went by his cabin, and stopped there last night."

"They say he got away with four of Boss Bender's gang?"

"He shot four in his cabin, and captured the other three, and we hanged them, so he got away with the entire gang, major."

"He is a wonderful man, Doc."

"A wonderful man, major."

"Colonel Roland and his daughter are clean gone on him, and on you, and on Faro Fred too."

"Indeed, major?"

"Yes, Doc, they say you are three of the most remarkable men they ever met."

"Yes, of our kind, major, and we are three of a kind," answered Frank Powell with a laugh.

"Yes, I'll swear to that, Doc."

"But where is Faro Fred?"

"In bed of course."

"Yes, I had forgotten his habits."

"And Monk Harris?"

"Went out on his hearse this morning."

"And the colonel?"

"He has gone over to his mine on horseback, and his pretty daughter went with him."

"They are nice people, Doc."

"Yes, I like them."

"They were anxious about you this morning, and said they hoped they would find you here upon their return to dinner."

"But, doctor, they say Blonde Bill and Black Bill, with the gang were too much for you?"

"Yes, they eluded all pursuit in some mysterious way."

"Guess they'll skip out of these diggings, now they see that you are in earnest."

"It won't be like Black Bill if he does; but as for Blonde Bill I do not know him well enough to be able to judge."

"He has nerve, that is certain, and if he handles his band well a dozen men can give a hundred Vigilantes more than they can do to catch them."

Now, major, I have some visits to make to the lame, halt and blind, so to speak, so will take my gray, if you will order him, and go to work."

"You'll be back to dinner?"

"I hope so, but if not on time, don't expect me, for I may have something to keep me away."

"The colonel is anxious to see you when he can, and Faro Fred left word if you were not here by noon he was to be called, and he would start out to look you up."

"Dear old Fred; I know he'd come to my aid if I needed it."

"Now I must be off, so have my gray ready for me by the time I come down-stairs."

Going up to his room Doctor Powell remained there for some minutes, and then coming down, mounted his splendid gray and rode off upon his professional calls.

He had made several visits to relieve suffering humanity, when, as he left a cabin in the mining camp known as the Devil's Half Acre, and so named on account of the hard citizens who dwelt there, he came suddenly upon three persons dashing along the trail upon horseback.

One was a low-browed, dark-faced man, short of stature, yet built for strength, and he was mounted upon a raw-boned sorrel that was as ugly as his master, yet had good going and staying qualities.

Frank Powell knew the man as one who had formerly been a guide, but who had taken to mining, yet passed half of his time hunting.

He was never in want of money, had been known to drop a few hundreds of a night in Faro Fred's, yet that he realized it from his mine was certainly not believed.

His character was none of the best, and he was a dangerous customer in a fight, having made his mark in a number of street and camp encounters.

What his name was no one seemed to know; but he was called Jerry the Pathfinder, and very

readily answered to this name when invited to drink or play cards.

His companions were Colonel Roland and his daughter.

"Oh, there is Doctor Powell," cried Ruby, as she caught sight of the doctor emerging from among the cabins.

Instantly they drew rein, Jerry the Pathfinder halting, too, and the doctor rode up, raising his broad sombrero politely, as he said:

"Good-morning, colonel. I hope you are well this morning, while I need not ask you, Miss Roland, unless your rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes belie you."

"No indeed, I feel as bright as a lark, doctor, and have been with father to his mine," said Ruby.

"I hope you were pleased with it, sir?"

"Oh, yes, far more than I expected I would be, and I like the men."

"In fact I feel that we shall like Golden Gulch, for Suggs keeps a good hotel, we have pleasant rooms, and the more we see of your people the more we like them."

"But we are glad to see you back in safety."

"Thank you, colonel."

"Any news from that daring fellow the Kid Glove Miner, Red Lightning, or—"

"Mr. Hale, father."

"True, Ruby, Hale is his name. Do you know, doctor, Ruby says I'll soon know all the slang of the border?"

"It is easy to drift into it, colonel, I assure you, and Miss Roland must look out that she is not caught, too," said the doctor, with a laugh.

"She already knows how to talk border, doctor: but you can tell us nothing of Hale?"

"Nothing, sir, for I have not seen him since we parted with him."

"I went on to his cabin however, and buried his dead."

"But he will turn up all right. But I will not detain you, and I also have a few calls to make."

"Then we will not hinder you, for we are on our way to the Gold Brick for dinner."

"I see that you have Jerry the Pathfinder with you."

"Yes; I have engaged him as a guide for a while, until we know the country."

"Is he a good guide?" asked Ruby, in a low tone.

"None better; but he'll bear watching, I think."

"I say, Jerry, I tell the colonel that you are a good guide, but will bear watching."

"Don't let him have cause to complain of you," and Frank Powell looked the man squarely in the face.

"No, Doc, I'll be squar', fer I hev a lady ter look arter now," was the answer of the guide, and with a bow the doctor rode on his way, while the others kept the trail to the hotel.

CHAPTER XXII.

AT THE ELGIN MINE.

AFTER leaving Colonel Roland and his daughter, Doctor Powell made several professional calls among the camps, and then as it was late and he knew that he would not have time to go to the Gold Brick and then reach the cabin of Red Lightning before dark, he determined to press on at once for the mountains.

He had a lingering hope that he would find the miner there.

Had he not thought so, he would have got Lanky to accompany him.

The doctor felt no hesitancy as far as he was concerned of going alone, for his immense strength, his unerring aim, and his skill as a borderman, he knew he could wholly rely upon.

But then, for the work he had on hand, he felt that two persons would be better than one.

What motive Red Lightning had for not returning with the party who had gone to the camp of the Tax-gatherers, he did not know; but he imagined that he would return to his cabin, as soon as he discovered that it was impossible for him to trail the outlaws from their den.

With these thoughts in his mind he rode up the rugged mountain trail.

Behind him lay the valley, with Golden Gulch in its center, and before him he well knew all was solitude and desolation, excepting the one cabin hidden in the mountains.

Soon, a turn of the trail shut out from his view the valley, and he had only the fastnesses of the mountain about him.

He knew the road well, and soon the cabin came in sight.

But there was no sign that it held an occupant.

All seemed deserted, and as he rode up he saw that no one had been there since his departure in the morning.

This was a great disappointment to him, for he had felt assured that Red Lightning had returned.

And more, the miner's not having returned caused him to feel deep anxiety regarding him.

It was no little thing for one man to undertake to dog the steps of a desperate band, and men too who had so mysteriously disappeared

from their encampment, that they might have been somewhere concealed watching the movements of their foes.

"Well, I am here, and alone, and here I shall remain for the night," he muttered.

He had evidently come with some purpose which he intended carrying out, for he rode his horse off to a secluded nook and staked him out, yet did not remove the saddle and bridle.

Then he returned to the cabin, and seeking the key which Red Lightning had told him he kept in a secret place, and where he had that morning deposited it, he went into the little house and looked up something to eat.

When he had accomplished this very necessary duty and pleasure, the doctor locked the door and strode down toward the mine, depositing the key in its place, and attaching to it a piece of paper upon which he had written a line to Red Lightning, should he return, telling him of his presence there.

Just as he passed the grave, marked by its wooden cross, where rested the former owners of the mine, Elegant Ed and his Angel, the sun's last rays fell upon it.

"Poor Ed, I would give much to know who killed you and your lovely wife," he muttered.

The cross that marked their grave—for they lay side by side in one grave—Frank Powell had himself erected to their memory, having had it carved out of wood.

He had greatly admired and liked Elegant Ed Elgin and his wife, and mourned deeply their loss.

For a few moments he stood by the grave in silence, and then he strode on his way once more, bending his steps to the mine.

The Elgin Mine had been originally a small cave, not very large and not very deep.

Ed Elgin had followed a bear there one day, and thus found gold.

He had staked his claim, set to work, and it had panned out much richer than he had admitted, for he knew the danger of possessing too great riches in these lone mountains.

But fearful had been the end of poor Elegant Ed and his Angel, and the mystery of their death no one in Golden Gulch had been able to clear up.

From the hands of William Blackstone, who had gambled away his inheritance and gone to the bad, until he became known as Black Bill, the Elgin mine, cabin—yes, and grave had passed into the hands of the Kid Glove Miner, who had been rechristened in border nomenclature as Red Lightning.

Dr. Powell knew well, from Red Lightning himself, how rich was the mine; but others at the Gulch did not think that it possessed much value, and wondered why its owner would stand what he did to work it.

After he took possession of his mine, it was said that Red Lightning was nightly visited by ghosts—in fact, none other than the spirits of Elegant Ed and his wife, who warned him to give it up, and depart.

Fearing some attack might be made upon Red Lightning, Frank Powell had employed the three hunter pards, Tempest Tom, Lanky and Duck Leg Dick, to watch for him against secret foes, and they had been run off by ghosts, and each one of them had told the same story of seeing Elegant Ed and his Angel in spirit form.

As for Red Lightning, he confessed also to having seen strange, shadowy forms, and received many warnings to leave the mine; but it was all to no purpose, for he would not give up his claim for ghost or mortal.

With all these things in his mind, Frank Powell walked quietly on to the mine, glanced about him for an instant, and then boldly entered it, just as twilight fell upon the earth.

He had decided to solve the mystery hanging over the mine, come what might.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MIDNIGHT MINER.

ONCE in the mine, and Dr. Powell found himself in darkness.

But he had come prepared, and taking a small dark-lantern from his pocket, he lighted it and made his way to a nook where he felt that he would find a safe retreat.

Into a corner he spread his blanket, and then, closing his lantern, threw himself down to rest.

Living, as he had been, amid the wild scenes of the West, accustomed to dangers by night and day, and, as a physician, trained to awake at all hours, he knew that he could trust himself to rouse from slumber at the slightest sound, or within a given time.

Hence he had no hesitancy in dropping off to sleep, and, in spite of the discomforts of his situation, was soon peacefully asleep.

Several hours at least he had slept, when he was awakened by a slight sound.

It might have been a small rock tumbling down from the loose earth, and it might not.

It might have been a prowling wolf looking for food, and it might not.

At any rate, Frank Powell knew that it was a direct sound of some kind that had awakened him, and he was on the alert in an instant.

Some people take a long time to gather their faculties which have been deadened by slumber.

But the man who has lived in peril by day and by night is wide awake in every sensibility the moment his eyes are open.

So it was with the doctor, for, hardly had he opened his eyes, when one hand grasped his dark-lantern and the other held his revolver.

Indistinctly he could see the opening of the mine, and one little star was visible, and upon this he fixed his eyes.

Soon he heard another sound, and it seemed as though it might be a footfall.

Was it a shuffling bear outside, and seeking a shelter in the cave?

It trod too heavily for a wolf, that was certain, and yet the step seemed light.

Then, as he looked, the star disappeared.

He looked, and it reappeared.

Several times this happened, and then Dr. Powell knew that it was not fancy, but that some object was passing and repassing before the entrance of the mine, and between him and the star.

Seated upon his blanket, one hand holding the lantern, his finger upon the spring, the other grasping his revolver, and a light pressure upon the trigger, he watched and waited.

The moments dragged slowly by, and then the star once more disappeared.

Then Frank Powell heard suppressed breathing, and knew that some one, or something, had entered the mine.

A minute of silence and suspense, and then the mine was illuminated, as a match was struck and a lantern was lighted.

Before him, and not fifteen feet away Frank Powell beheld who the midnight intruder was.

A man of large stature, dressed in the coarsest garb worn by miners, and with a face the very acme of evil.

At his feet were several implements of work, and in his hand he held the common glass lantern which he had lighted.

Holding it above his head he glanced about the cave, seemingly peering into the very recess where the doctor sat, yet not seeing him.

He was armed with a pair of revolvers, one of which he took from his belt and placed by the side of his lantern, which he put in a position to throw light upon a certain part of the mine.

Then he seized his pick and set to work, digging into the loose earth upon one side.

The very first stroke brought forth several glittering specks, which he eagerly seized and threw upon a buckskin which he laid down to receive them.

Again he gave a stroke, and with like result.

Thus he went on for a long time, some strokes repaying him well, and others panning out small.

But he seemed satisfied, and grunted forth his delight whenever a glittering particle of metal met his gaze.

Like a panther watching its prey, Frank Powell sat upon his blanket gazing upon the midnight miner at his work.

He seemed to have no desire to interrupt him, and if he had, he was in no hurry to do so.

In fact, he seemed rather to enjoy the man's working so steadily, and kept as still as a mouse and as patient as an Indian.

"I guess it's gettin' on towards wakin' up time, so I'd better be off," growled the midnight worker of another man's mine. "I'll give jest one more blow o' ther pick."

This was done, and a rich haul was the result.

Encouraged by this he again struck a blow, and this one panned out as well as the other.

"Guess I'll git rich at this rate. Leastways, it won't take me many nights more, fer I hev a snug leetle pile laid up now, which I hev dug out o' this hole."

"He! he! he! ef Kid Gloves were to catch me, then it w'u'd be bad off I'd be, fer he are a terner turned loose ter kill."

"But he don't think ther mine are worked day an' night."

"Waal, it are better losin' my sleep o' nights an' be gittin' suthin' fer it, then ter be workin' all day an' not diggin' out enough dust fer drinks."

"He! he! he! it were a blessed time when I struck this mine, fer it hev panned me out a clean ten thousan', and when it do strike ther sum o' ten more, I intends ter go back ter old Illinois, start a country store an' turn honest, fer nobody will know that I hev did things out heur that w'u'd hang me."

"No, no, I'll turn honest, jine ther chu'ch, an' become a pillar, so I kin marry a rich widdy without no 'cumbrances."

"No, I guess I won't marry, fer she'd fetch up ter me poor Sue, whose throat I cut thinkin' she hed wronged me, an' whom I found out I hed done a injustice to in killin' her, arter it were too late ter fetch her back."

"Waal, waal, I hev been tryin' ter fergit that fer fifteen year, an' it keeps right in my mem'ry yet."

"I hev kilt other folks, an' they don't hurt me as poor Sue does when I thinks of her."

"Jershua! how scared I was when I hern them ghosts walkin' round heur some nights ago."

I s'pected ter see Sue next.

"Folks says in Golden Gulch that they be ther ghosts of Elegant Ed an' his Angel; but that Kid Glove Pilgrim don't keer a durn fer 'em."

"They skeert me off fer a night or two; but I he'snt seen 'em of late, an' I doesn't want ter see 'em no more."

Thus the miner worked on and talked on to himself, unmindful that every blow he struck, every piece of gold he picked up was seen, and that every word he uttered was heard.

Still unwilling to tear himself away from his work, he kept digging until at last he said:

"But I must be off, fer that Kid Glove Pilgrim might jist look in on me, an' then I'd git lead instead o' gold."

"Lordy! but I he's done well ter-night."

"Guess that is several hundred thar, an' it hain't no bad work, I kin tell yer."

"Waal, waal, I'll say good-by ontill ter-morrer night."

He had replaced his revolver in his belt, and was gathering up the buckskin with its pile of gold upon it, when he shrunk back with horror, for before him stood a tall form, and a revolver's muzzle was pressed hard against his head, while a deep, stern voice said:

"Pard, I want you!"

"Lordy! yer is ther Kid Glove Pilgrim," and the man dared not look up.

"No, I am Frank Powell."

"Ther Magic Doctor!" and the man glanced up into the face of the doctor, who answered quietly:

"So I am called."

"Waal, what does yer want in this mine stealin', fer I he's tracked yer heur, Doc Powell, an' here are ther buckskin full o' gold yer he's dug?" cried the villain with sudden effrontry.

The doctor laughed lightly at this, and said:

"No, no, Idaho Ike, that won't wash, to play the bluff game, and then to lay your work on me."

"I he's suspected yer, Doc, fer some time, an' I trailed yer heur ter-night, hopin' I'd catch yer."

"But yer was too quick fer me, an' tuk me at a vantage: but I'll sw'ar, ef yer let me go, I won't tell on yer an' you kin keep ther dust yer he's dug."

"Idaho Ike, you are a most consummate devil."

"None o' yer blarney, Doc Powell, fer I doesn't stand it."

"You let me go, take that weepin' out o' my face, an' I'll not set ther Vigilantes onter yer fer this night's work."

Again the doctor laughed, but his eyes watched every move of the man before him.

"Come, Idaho Ike, no fooling, and hands up!"

"Say, Doc, I—"

"Hands up, sir!"

"Doc, I—"

"Hands up, or die!"

There was no mistaking the last stern command, and up above his head went the hands of the villain.

Still covering him with his revolver in his left hand, Doctor Powell took from him, his belt of arms, and searched him for any concealed weapon which he might have, yet found none.

"Now, Idaho Ike, march!"

"Which way?" was the sullen question.

"Straight for the cabin."

"Yer he's ter pass ther grave."

"I know it."

"I doesn't want ter pass no graves at night."

"It are bad luck."

"You get into one to-night, if you don't obey, and that will be worse luck," was the exceedingly significant reply.

"Lordy!"

"Go on!"

"What hev you got ter do with this mine, Doc Powell, I'd like to know."

"Move, sir!"

Off went the villain, and the doctor followed a step behind him, his revolver covering him.

"Can't we go round this grave, Doc?"

"No."

"I told yer it were bad luck."

"You'll never get by it if I have to speak again, sir."

"I are paddlin'," and the villain moved on once more.

Once at the cabin and the doctor took a lariat from a peg where it hung, and tied his prisoner most securely.

Then he secured the key, without his being seen by Idaho Ike, and led the scamp into the cabin.

"Waal, whar are ther Kid Gloves?"

"Off hunting for just such villains as you are."

"Yer better be keerful, Doc Powell, fer judgement are comin' fer sich as you is."

The doctor laughed, and making his prisoner secure, threw some wood into the fireplace, and soon had a bright fire.

"Now, Idaho Ike, I intend to finish out my nap until daylight, and then I will take you to Golden Gulch."

"I'll give yer dust to sell ef yer don't do it, Doc," whined the man.

"I am not for sale, Idaho Ike."

"There, lie down upon that robe if you wish to sleep, and you had better make the best of it, as you will doubtless be hanged within twelve hours."

"Oh, Lordy! don't be cruel, Doc."

"Bah! you are the man who has been a terror in Golden Gulch for a year past."

"You are, by your own confession, a wife-murderer, and more, and I know you to be a thief, for I caught you stealing, so you are a fit subject for the Vigilantes, and I intend to turn you over to them, as it is time such as you are, were being thinned out of Golden Gulch."

"Now lie down there and try and repent of your sins in silence, for I am tired out and want rest."

The doctor threw himself upon Red Lightning's bed as he spoke, and almost instantly sunk to sleep.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

PERHAPS it was his loss of rest of late, and extra physical exertion, during the stirring scenes of the past few days in Golden Gulch, which made Frank Powell sleep more heavily than was his wont; but certain it was that his prisoner moved several times and did not arouse him.

Seeing this, the prisoner made another movement, and with like result.

Then, into his wicked brain came a plot to escape.

The doctor, upon entering the cabin had securely bound his feet, and the ends of the lariat were made fast to either side of the room.

This kept the prisoner from hobbling away from his place, which was just in front of the hearth, upon a large bear-robe.

His hands, with a view to mercy, he had tied in front of him, and in such a way that he felt that he could not untie the lariat.

But Idaho Ike was a tough customer, one of the hard citizens of Golden Gulch, and a resident of the quarter known as the Devil's Half Acre, where the worst characters thrived.

He was scarred all over, and had lived through some desperate wounds.

Far from being a living example of the theory that "a burnt child dreads the fire," he did not care for wounds and pain, though he loved life and clung to it desperately at all times.

Seeing a large ember that had fallen from the other logs, and lay half upon the hearth, Idaho Ike determined to turn it to account.

Sitting up, he then leaned forward, and placed the thong about his left wrist directly upon the red-hot end of the log.

He shuddered slightly as the coals touched his flesh, yet did not flinch and kept the lariat hard against it.

Of course the result could only be to char the raw-hide lariat, so that a twist of the wrist would break it in two.

And this it did do, though the fire burnt deep into the hardened flesh of the man, who smiled as he felt the pain, for what cared he for that if he could save his life?

Unmindful of his severely burnt hand, he bent over, and with his sharp, squirrel-like teeth, soon cut the thongs that held his feet so securely.

Then he was free from bonds at least, and his eyes rested upon his belt of arms, which the doctor had hung upon a peg near the fireplace.

Quietly he arose, making not the slightest sound, and stretching forth his hand he grasped the coveted weapon, drew it from the belt, and was an armed man.

Frank Powell lay upon the bed as quiet as though he were dead.

His face was turned toward the wall, and consequently his back was toward Idaho Ike.

Upon a peg at the head of the bed hung his belt, in which were his revolvers and knife, and they were within easy reach, had he been lying with his face toward them.

But he slept well, and Idaho Ike was careful to make no sound to disturb him.

The door was locked on the inside, and the key was in the doctor's pocket, otherwise he would have made an effort to escape without trying conclusions with a man whom he knew would die hard, even if he mortally wounded him.

For air, one of the windows in the back of the cabin was partly open, and yet Idaho Ike knew that to attempt to get out that way would make too much noise and arouse the sleeping lion.

"I he's got ter risk it an' kill him," he said to himself, and he stepped nearer his intended victim.

Then he raised the weapon and leveled it fairly at the massive head, with its wealth of waving black hair.

The fire gave a bright light and he could get good aim, so he intended to fire.

Lowering the revolver he cocked it, for he had only been trying his aim before, and once more was bringing it to a level when there came a ringing report, a crash, and a shriek commingled.

Ere the report had died away, Frank Powell was upon his feet, his revolver in his hand, and confronting his foe, who now stood before him, his hand shattered and dripping blood, and his revolver, the butt of which was in splinters, lying at his feet.

"Well, Idaho Ike, what means this?" sternly demanded Frank Powell.

"It means, Powell, that I sent a bullet through that fellows' hand, just as he was about to fire upon you," said a stern voice at the window.

"Ha! Hale, as I live!" cried the doctor.

"Yes, and I am glad that you do live."

"But open the door and let me in, please."

This request was quickly obeyed, and Red Lightning entered his cabin, his face pale and haggard, his clothes in bad condition, and his kid gloves blood-stained and dirt-begrimed.

Day had already dawned, the doctor saw, as he opened the door, and grasping the hand of his friend he cried:

"In heaven's name, Hale, what has happened?"

"No harm has befallen me personally, Powell, though I have had a rough time of it, and have a young friend with me who sadly needs your surgical skill."

"He shall have it; but where is he?"

"Awaiting me out by the stable, where I halted when I saw smoke coming out of the chimney, and came on alone to reconnoiter."

"The window being open I looked in and just in the nick of time, as this ugly citizen here was covering you with his revolver, and was about to fire."

"I fired first, and I guess I've laid his right hand up for repairs for awhile at least."

"But who is he?"

"Idaho Ike, they call him at the Gulch," answered the doctor, and in a few words he went on to tell just what happened, adding:

"But how you got loose, Idaho Ike, I am at a loss to know."

"I burnt myself loose," was the defiant reply, as he held up his wrist which was fairly roasted.

"By Heaven! but you have nerve, my man, and I could half forgive you for stealing my gold," said Red Lightning, and then he added:

"Now, doctor, I want you to do me a favor."

"Certainly."

"Take my young friend on to Golden Gulch, and get him a pleasant room at the Gold Brick."

"Tell Major Suggs I will be responsible for all bills, and to give the young man every attention."

"He has an arm which was broken, and I set it as well as I could, and he has a fractured rib or two, so he will need all your skill to fetch him round."

"I was on my way with him to Golden Gulch when I found the trail would bring us by my cabin, and I am glad I came."

"But will you not go with me?"

"No, for I need rest."

"And this wretch, who has a large quantity of your gold hidden away?"

"He has shown such pluck in freeing himself I hate to see him hanged, and if he will give me back my gold and swear to decamp from Golden Gulch, under pain of death if he remains, I will let him go."

"He deserves hanging."

"I know that, Powell, but we'll give him one more chance."

"Now, my man, will you tell me where you have hidden my gold?"

"I will, pard, an' tell yer squar'."

"I are bleedin' consid'ble from yer shot, an' this heur burn are feelin' like it war on fire; so ef ther Doc will fix me up a leetle, I'll take yer ter whar I hev hid yer dust, an' then I'll git lively now, you bet, out o' these diggins, with a thankee to you an' ther Magic Doctor fer leavin' me skip."

"What do you say, Powell?"

"Let him go."

"But, Idaho Ike, I'll kill you at sight if I ever catch you within fifty miles of Golden Gulch again."

"Do it, Doc, do it."

"Oh, I will; you may be sure of that."

"Now let me dress those wounds of yours."

This the doctor quickly did, and then the three left the cabin and went to where Frank King was waiting the return of the miner.

"King, this is my friend, Dr. Frank Powell, of Golden Gulch, and I place you in his charge wholly."

"He will ride right on with you to the Gold Brick Hotel, where you can be made most comfortable, and I will be in to see you in a day or two; but now I have a prisoner to look after, whom the doctor caught for me, and I know you will excuse my going on now."

"Certainly, sir," answered Frank King, whose white face showed how much he had suffered.

"I will go with you at once, for my horse is not far away," kindly said the doctor, and he soon after rode down the trail with the wounded youth, while Red Lightning went with Idaho Ike to the hiding place of the gold which he had stolen by night from the mine.

CHAPTER XXV.

CURIOSITY UNSATISFIED.

THERE was considerable excitement in Golden Gulch, when Frank Powell rode up to the Gold Brick Hotel, accompanied by a young man whom the most casual observer could see was suffering greatly.

His face was white and drawn with pain, and his eyes were haggard, while every movement he made caused him to set his lips hard to keep back a cry of anguish.

As tenderly as possible Frank Powell took him from his horse, and aided by Colonel Roland, who was upon the piazza when he arrived, he bore him to a room next to his own, and which chamber had been occupied by Black Bill when he was a guest at Major Suggs's hotel.

"Now, major, you are to treat this young gentleman as though he was your own son," said the doctor, as he threw off his coat and prepared to make an examination of the injuries the youth had received.

When alone with his patient the doctor began his examination, and his skill soon set the fractured bones.

"Why, Hale has proven himself a surgeon of no common order," he said, "for he has had to deal with a patient constantly upon the move. But you shall have rest, and in a short while you'll be as good as new."

"It will still be long, dreary weeks before I can go out, I fear," said Frank King, sadly.

"Weeks, yes; but not so dreary as you imagine."

"I have plenty of books which you can read, and I'll get Faro Fred and Colonel Roland to sit with you when I am away, so you'll not be lonesome."

"But I have work to do."

"Hale will attend to that for you, no doubt."

"Ah, yes; but I would like to aid him."

"No, you must not get blue or impatient, for you will only retard your recovery thereby." And having made his patient as comfortable as it was possible for him to be, the doctor left the room to attend to other duties devolving upon him.

He found the bar crowded when he went down-stairs, and all very curious as to who was the stranger he had brought in.

But he did not gratify their curiosity in the least, and passed on to the room of the old hunter, Tempest Tom, whom Blonde Bill had so severely wounded the night of his escape with Black Bill by the generous-heartedness of Ruby Roland.

Tempest Tom was too hard a knot to die with less than a bullet in his brain and heart, and was doing splendidly; so the doctor, after dressing his wound, went to his breakfast.

He found Colonel Roland and Ruby in the breakfast room, for they were not early risers, and the maiden asked:

"Doctor Powell, who was that very handsome, yet boyish-looking young man whom you brought to the hotel wounded awhile since?"

"His name is Frank King, Miss Roland, and he is a friend of Horace Hale."

"Ah! then you have seen Mr. Hale?" she asked quickly.

"Yes, I left him just after dawn this morning, at his own cabin."

"Indeed! then he got back in safety?"

"Yes, and just at the right time to save my life," and the doctor told of his adventure of the night before.

"I congratulate you, sir," said the colonel.

"But you say that Mr. Hale intends to let that man go free?"

"He will, as soon as the fellow has shown him where he has hidden his stolen gold, and which he hinted was some miles away."

"Then Mr. Hale will not be at his cabin to-day?" said Ruby quietly.

"Not this morning at any rate, Miss Roland."

"But what did he do about the outlaws?" persisted Ruby.

"He did not tell me the result of his search for them."

"And where did he find this young man, Mr. Frank King, I believe you said his name is?"

"He met him somewhere in the upper mines, I believe, and saved him from the attack of a ferocious bear, as I understood Mr. King to say, for the wounds he has received were given him by the brute, which was then killed by Hale."

"Another claim to his new name of Red Lightning, said the colonel with a smile, and, having finished his breakfast he said:

"Ruby, will you go to the mine with me this morning?"

"Yes, father, for I enjoy the ride too much to lose it."

"Will you ride with us, Doctor Powell?"

"I should be most happy to, did I not have to make my round of the camps to doctor the invalids."

"We shall be most happy to see you, doctor, in our rooms whenever you are at leisure," said the colonel, and Ruby indorsed the invitation with one of her sweetest smiles, as she followed her father from the breakfast-table, leaving the doctor alone at the table.

Upon going out into the office once more, the doctor found many anxious to know what adventures he had met with, which caused him to bring to the Gold Brick with him a young stranger severely wounded.

But Frank Powell was not a man to question upon a subject he wished to keep silent upon, so the questioners were forced to rest with the mystery unsolved.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TREACHEROUS GUIDE.

WHEN Ruby Roland rode to the Bonanza mine with her father, she had formed a determination in her mind to go on a little expedition of her own.

The Elgin mine she had heard so much of, the sad story of poor Elegant Ed and his Angel had been repeated to her so often, that she was anxious to see it.

Then, too, it had been won at a game of cards from William Blackstone, she knew, and he had turned out a villain, while the one who had played him for it was making a fortune from it, so her father said.

And that man was one she had become most deeply interested in in spite of her not knowing really who or what he was, and that he seemed a mystery to every one.

The ghost stories about the mine she had also heard, and she was anxious to see the mine, the cabin and the grave of the Elgins.

Her father, upon his arrival at the mine, she knew was busy, and would be for several hours, getting new hands and organizing thoroughly for work.

So she determined to steal off, and called to Jerry, the Pathfinder, who kept constantly near her, as though ever ready to perform her slightest wish.

"Jerry."

"Yes, leddy," he answered, humbly.

"I wish to go on a little gallop without my father."

"Not alone, leddy?"

"No; you must go with me."

"Certainly, leddy."

"I'll git ther animi'es."

He soon brought up Ruby's horse and his own, and, mounting, they dashed away, the colonel too busy to notice the departure of his daughter.

After getting clear of the camps about the Bonanza mine, Ruby asked:

"Jerry, do you know the mountain trails?"

"Same as you does a book, leddy."

"Do you know the Elgin mine?"

"Yes, miss."

"Well, I want to go there."

"All right, leddy; whar you says go, I goes."

"Is it very far?"

"Not so very far, miss."

"Ef we keeps a lively pace we kin git back by ther time yer pa wants ter start ter his grub."

"But yer won't hev no time ter stay thar."

"Never mind, I simply wish to go there, see the cabin, the mine and the grave of its former owners."

Jerry made no reply, but set off at a swift canter, and Ruby closely followed him.

Soon they struck the mountain trail, and the Pathfinder kept steadily on, keeping his horse at a good pace.

Once or twice did Ruby pause to behold the grand view behind her, but each time the guide hastened her on, urging that they would have no time to spare.

At last they came in sight of the snug, cosey little cabin, which had been the home of the unfortunate man and his wife, who had lost their lives beneath its roof, at the hands of an assassin.

Ruby gazed upon it with feelings of deep interest, and her face colored, as she thought that after all Horace Hale might be there and see her, which she wished to avoid.

From the cabin they rode to the grave, and here Ruby dismounted, and stood by the side of the lowly mound, while she read the inscription upon the cross, and which had been skillfully cut into the wood with a knife.

"Doctor Powell erected this cross to their memory, you say, Jerry?" she asked.

"Yes, he put it thar."

"And how far is the mine from here?"

"Only a leetle way."

"Well, I had better not go there to-day, for I can come again with my father some other time."

"Better see it now, miss, for it are worth it."

"Twon't take but a minute," urged the Pathfinder.

"Very well, I will go there now," and Ruby sprang lightly into her saddle, and followed the guide.

"There it are, miss, an' they do say heaps o' gold is found in thet hole."

"It seems to be nothing but a cave."

"Yas, leddy, it do hev thet look."

"But you jist git down an' look inside, ef yer wants ter see ther dust dazzle yer eyes."

This was a temptation Ruby could not resist, and dismounting again she threw her rein to the guide, while she entered the mine.

As she did so, Jerry, the Pathfinder, hitched the rein of Ruby's horse over the horn of his saddle, and followed her into the mine.

Then, ere she was aware of danger, she was seized in his powerful grasp, a hand was pressed over her mouth to suppress her cries, and a lariat was wound tightly about her, pinioning her arms to her side, while he said, hoarsely:

"Gal, I guesses yer father will pay a large sum o' money ter git you back, an' ef he do, he kin hev yer."

"Villain! how dare you treat me thus?" she said, with quivering voice and flashing eyes.

"I wants money, gal, an' as I can't dig it out o' ther earth, I'll git it out o' yer dad's pocket."

"I wants a big price fer yer, an' I intends ter take yer ter a leetle cabin I knows of whar ye'll be safe."

"Now I'll jist close up thet pretty mouth o' yours, or yer'll sing out when I don't want yer ter."

In vain was resistance, and she knew it, and to save herself trouble she allowed him to tightly bandage her mouth, which effectually prevented further utterance.

Then he led her from the cave and raised her to her saddle, while he, mounting his horse, held her bridle-rein in his hand, and started off at a rapid canter, his face full of triumph at his capture.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DESPERADO'S GRATITUDE FOR LIFE.

WHEN Doctor Powell rode away with Frank King, on the way to Golden Gulch, Red Lightning turned to his prisoner and said:

"No, my man, I am ready to carry out my compact if you are."

"I is more than ready, pard."

"Well, lead the way and I will follow."

"Say, can't we compromise this matter, pard?"

"How do you mean?"

"Yer see I has dug a goodly sum out o' ther mine."

"Yes."

"Vaal, ver w'u'dn't hev minded it, or know'd about it ef Doc Powell hedn't cotched me?"

"True."

"My diggin' ther gold saved your diggin' it."

"Go on, sir."

"Vaal, as I hed ther work to do, an' I is sick a all-fired poor man, s'pose yer jist let me hev half o' ther dust."

"I'll give it all to you, and then take you to Golden Gulch to the Vigilantes."

"No, don't do that, fer yer has crippled me fer life now, as yer see," and he held up his hand which had been wounded by Red Lightning's bullet.

"You will soon get over that wound, for a little lead won't hurt such as you are much."

"Vaal, I are burnt in this hand, so I can't work ter make a honest living."

"Come, you must decide one way or the other."

"Will you take me to where you have hidin' my gold, or shall I take you to the Vigilantes."

"Speak, quick, for I don't care which you do."

"Thar are more fun fer me in my takin' you ter ther hidin'-place o' ther gold."

"Then be off, for I will have no more talk about it."

Idaho Ike saw that he had dilly-dallied all he dared and he set off on the trail which would lead him to the hiding-place where he had concealed the treasure he had stolen.

He walked at a slow pace, as though reluctant to go, but he glanced behind at his enemy once, and not liking the expression he beheld on his face, kept on in silence.

After a long and tedious tramp through the mountains, he halted at a large boulder and said:

"Pard, we is thar."

"Where?"

"At ther gold I has hid."

"Show it to me."

"Must I?"

"You must."

"Then I suppose I must," and with a deep sigh, the miner stepped to a tree near by, ran his hand into an opening, and began drawing out buckskin sack after sack of gold.

"You have done well at mining in another man's mine," said Red Lightning quietly.

"I has; an' it are putty hard ter see all my hard work go."

"If you like the gold more than your life, you can have it—to bequeath as you please."

"Which do you prefer?"

"I'll take ther life every time."

"Gold are good ter handle, but life are better fer me."

"I kin git dust ag'in, ef I are honest an' perseverin', but I can't git life once my chips has been cal't in."

"Now thar is ther last bag."

"You are sure of that?"

"I is; fer thar was jest ten et 'em, an' I was layin' ter git ten more."

"Well, I'll take a look;" and Red Lightning thrust his hand into the hole in the tree, and it returned with a bag of gold.

He said nothing, but smiled, and the look which Idaho Ike put on was ludicrous in its virginal innocence and surprise.

"Waal, I do declar'!"

"Somebody else has been hidin' dust in ther same tree."

"See—I have here now fifteen little bags of dust instead of ten."

"Two of them you may have, for I don't wish to be too hard upon you, after your hard work in digging the gold for me, and also you are wounded in one hand and severely scorched in the other—so that it will be weeks before you can do any honest work for a living."

"Jess so, pard—jess so; an' I thanks yer, fer yer hes been all fired kind ter me."

"Ef thar were a parson round handy I'd git convarted, I feels so good-like jist now."

"Well, I hope you will continue to feel that wav."

"Now stow these two bags of gold somewhere about your clothes, and be off."

"I hain't a-goin' ter tarry, pard, you kin bet!"

As he was crippled so in both hands, Red Lightning put the gold in various receptacles about his clothing, and buckled his belt around his waist.

"Now don't let me catch you again, Idaho Ike," he said.

"Ef yer does yer'll kill me?"

"Yes."

"All right, pard—yer won't catch me ag'in, I'll swar."

"Good by!" and the desperado turned away—but quick as a flash he wheeled, his revolver in his severely burnt hand, and it was leveled and fired right at the heart of Red Lightning, who fell like a log in his tracks.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE PATHFINDER'S CAPTIVE.

AFTER his treachery to Ruby Roland, the Pathfinder pressed on rapidly with his captive, seemingly most anxious to get away from the dangerous locality of the Elgin mine.

He had seized the maiden with one idea—that of making money by her ransom.

He felt that as the manager of the Bonanza mine, her father could pay a large sum for her restoration to him in safety, and he did not doubt for an instant but that he would gladly do so.

Having reached a point so secluded that no further danger could be apprehended, he removed the bandage from Ruby's mouth, thus giving her the power of utterance.

"Where are you taking me?" asked the maiden, calmly, keeping up her presence of mind, though her heart was throbbing with fear.

"I are takin' yer to a place whar yer'll be safe, until I gits ther dust from yer pa, what he is willin' ter pay fer yer," was the answer.

"You will ask a price for me then?" asked Ruby, relieved to feel that her fate was not to be as bad as she had feared, yet, knowing that her father was not a rich man, fearful that the price would be far above his ability to pay.

"Yas, I'll git a snug leetle sum fer yer, 'cause yer is valuable."

"At what do you value me?" she asked, with a sneer.

"Waal, I hain't fully calkilated yet jist what yer is wuth."

"But I'll soon know."

"Now I wants yer ter behave yerself, an' no foolishness, an' we'll git along."

"Bat of yer gives me trouble ter hold yer, then I jist puts ropes on yer that yer can't break."

"Oah! I'll not try to get away from you, knowing the utter hopelessness of my escaping from such a bloodhound."

"Yer'll find me a bloodhound on yer trail ef yer does give me ther slip, an' ef I catches yer I'll knife yer," was the savage reply.

As Doctor Frank Powell had said, there was no man about Golden Gulch who knew the country better than the Pathfinder, and he followed trails in his flight, or rather bearings, which no one else had an idea of.

He seemed to think that Ruby could stand as much hard riding as he could, and so held on without resting.

She never complained, however, but drew a sigh of relief when at last he halted.

They were in a valley, and upon a thicket-grown mountain side, for above them towered a lofty and bold range of hills.

"Now, leetle gal, yer see this hill, does yer?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Waal, it are ter be our house, fer a while.

"It hain't so comfortable as ther Gold Brick Palace, but it are better than bein' out."

"Now, yer mustn't kick beca'se I blinds yer eyes, fer it hes ter be did."

"I am powerless," was the low reply, and taking her own handkerchief, for Pathfinder never boasted of such a luxury for himself, he securely blindfolded her.

Then he took the rein of her horse and moved on toward the hill-side.

"Thar hes been other folks scootin' round here, I see, by ther tracks; but 'tain't likely they hes found ther cabin."

"No, they was a huntin' party, I guesses, an' ther trail goes yonderways."

He was glad to see the trail turn off from the course he was going.

After a while he came to where there was a wall of rock before him, the mountain at that point having a precipitous face of several hundred feet.

To one only a few feet away it had the appearance of an unbroken wall, with here and there an indentation in it.

Toward one of these slight indentations Pathfinder moved, and, abruptly turning his horse around a large boulder, which had evidently, a long way back in the past, fallen from the cliff, he found before him an arched opening right into the cliff.

It was a tunnel rather than a cave, and ran under the wall, for, riding into it, soon light appeared ahead, and before long the captor and captive emerged into one of those sinks, or bowls, for which that country is noted.

It was very similar to the walled in valley where Blonde Bill had sought a retreat, only that it was upon a smaller scale.

In one end of it stood a rough cabin of logs, containing one room, and there was a spring of icy water before the door, and plots of long, juicy grass all through the little valley.

Riding up to the door, Pathfinder threw himself from his horse, and then aided Ruby to alight, for he had most securely bound her hands behind her, for he really feared the girl.

His first act then was to lead the horses some distance away and stake them out, and then Ruby, who had sunk down upon the grass in sheer fatigue, saw him returning.

But suddenly she heard a fierce growl, and out from behind a boulder rushed a large bear.

She uttered a cry of horror as the animal dashed directly upon the guide, who was certainly taken by surprise.

But he turned quickly, and seeing that he had no time to fly, drew a revolver with lightning-like dexterity, and began at once firing full at the savage brute.

The animal was staggered by the shots, and hard hit; but he reached his human foe, and Ruby gave a terrified cry as she saw the two meet in deadly encounter.

"Git my rifle gal an' let him hev it!" yelled the guide.

But he had forgotten that she was bound, and in mortal horror she crouched upon her knees gazing upon the fearful combat.

And fearful it was, for the guide had been forced to close with the monster, and with his knife was making huge gashes in the hairy hide.

At last, when Ruby felt that there was no hope for her, and that the man must succumb to the brute and her fate be as fearful, the bear reeled and fell heavily.

A few nervous twitches of the massive feet, a gnashing of the jaws, and the monster was dead.

But the guide?

He came toward Ruby staggering, like a drunken man.

"Gal, I hed forgotted that yer was tied; but I kin onloose yer, an' then yer kin tie up ther blood streams, or they'll call in my chips."

"I hain't hurted much, only these scratches yer see; but then they hes cut ther veins, and ef ther red hain't stopped I'll be calt in pretty suddint."

"I will do what I can for you, sir," said Ruby, and, as soon as her hands were free she began hastily to bandage his wounds and check the flow of blood.

He had called them "scratches," but they were bad wounds, though not dangerous, as the bear had not bitten, but clawed him.

It did flash through her mind then to take one of his revolvers and kill him, as he sat down upon the ground, seemingly at her mercy.

But her heart revolted at this, while she muttered:

"Not now that he is so badly wounded will I."

"But, if he was as he was before that fearful encounter, I would kill him did opportunity offer."

"Now, I feel that I can escape without takin' his life, for certainly he can do me no harm now."

"Thankee, gal, yer is as good as Doc Powell at patchin' up wounds."

"Now thar is yer cabin, an' I'll bunk outside."

"Jist make yerself comfortable, fer thar is provisions thar, robes and sich, fer I hes prepared fer yer reception, hevin' intended ter make dust out o' yer since yer fust come ter ther Gulch."

"Behave yerself, an' yer hain't tied; but if yer begins any funny business now that I are used up kinder, then I will lock yer inter some irons I h'es fer safe keepin'."

Ruby made no reply, but her heart beat light with hope that she would not long be the prisoner of the treacherous guide.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A FAVOR RETURNED.

FINDING himself in the neighborhood of the Bonanza mine during his round of professional calls, Dr. Powell concluded to drop in and pay the colonel a little visit.

He found Colonel Roland just making inquiries about his daughter, whom, a miner said,

had ridden off up the mountain some time before.

"Not alone, certainly?" said Frank Powell, with some degree of anxiety in his tone, and which Colonel Roland noticed.

"No, Doc, she went with that limb o' Satin, Pathfinder," answered the miner, who certainly was not an admirer of the guide.

"And up the mountain trail they went?"

"Yas, Doc, I seen 'em goin' that way."

"You surely do not think harm could have befallen my daughter?" asked Colonel Roland, turning pale.

"I certainly hope not, sir; but she was very imprudent to trust herself off with that man, whom you may remember, Colonel Roland, I told you to watch."

"Yes, and intended discharging him to-night, as his services as guide are no longer necessary; and more, I do not like him."

"Well, colonel, I will take a little ride up into the hills, and see if I cannot find Miss Roland and escort her home."

"Do not be alarmed, sir; for there is no cause yet for it, though your daughter has been imprudent."

"Yet, as she goes toward the home of Red Lightning, Pathfinder will be on his guard."

With this Frank Powell rode off at a canter, and took a trail leading up into the mountains, and round to the Elgin mines, but not the one usually taken by him in visiting Red Lightning.

He had never liked the guide, and, though he did not suspect that he would kidnap Ruby, yet he knew that she wore handsome jewelry and carried her father's purse for him, and knowing this, he feared that Pathfinder might rob her once he had her a safe distance from Golden Gulch, and leave her to find her way back as best she could.

Following the trail which he had taken, intending to make a flank movement upon Red Lightning's cabin and return the other way, in hopes of heading Ruby and her guide off, Dr. Powell suddenly drew rein and threw himself from his saddle, in a manner that plainly indicated that he had made some startling discovery.

And he had, for, just away from the trail he saw a human form lying.

In a moment he was bending over it, and pressing his hand upon the heart.

"Thank God he lives," he cried eagerly.

The eyes opened at his voice, and fixing his gaze upon the face bending over him, the words came in a low tone:

"Powell! it is you, is it?"

"Yes, Hale, and I find you here in a bad way."

"Ah! I remember! I was shot by that villain, Idaho Ike, who has seized my gold and left me, as he believed dead."

"But I feel no pain, though the bullet struck me squarely here," and he placed his hand over his heart.

"Let me see!" and the hunting-shirt was torn aside, and, after an instant, Frank Powell cried delightedly:

"Bravo! see here!"

He held up, as he spoke a large gold medal, and flattened against it was the bullet, which had been checked in its deadly flight.

Indeed! that medal was given to me in Texas for saving the lives of two of the Rangers, and once before it caught a bullet just as it has done now, and I have worn it for good-luck, as the miners say."

"It certainly has saved you, Hale."

"See! the bullet was well aimed, and would have killed you."

"As it was, the blow knocked you breathless, and it has taken you some time to recover from the shock, unaided as you have been."

"Had I not come along as I did to move you, and start the circulation of the blood, you might have died."

"I am glad that you came, Powell, I assure you, and you have returned the favor I rendered you at the cabin, saving you from that same scamp."

"And Idaho Ike did this?"

"Yes."

"After you had spared his life?"

"Yes, and given him some gold on account of his wounded hand and burnt wrist."

"He started off, turned, and fired when I had no idea he would be so treacherous."

"Now he has gone with my gold, and my horse too."

"No, there is your horse," and Powell pointed to the animal feeding some distance away.

"Strange that he should have left him."

"No, for he is a man who prefers to *hoof it*, as they say here, to riding."

"The trail of a horse too could be easily followed, while he could leave no track, if so he wishes."

"But I shall follow him, and at once."

"And more, Powell, this time he shall not escape!"

There was that in the look of Red Lightning which showed Frank Powell that he meant to keep his word, so he said:

"The treacherous rascal does not deserve to live, and I wish I could go with you on his trail;

but the truth is that pretty little Ruby Roland—”

“Ha! what of her?” eagerly asked Red Lightning.

“Oh! no harm, I hope; but she rode off on the trail to your cabin this morning, alone with that wretch, Pathfinder, whom you know her father employed as a guide until they knew the surroundings of Golden Gulch.”

“Well, what then, Powell?”

“Only I feared the scamp might rob her, and was on my way to look her up when I came upon you so fortunately.”

“This is a trail I seldom take, but instinctively I took it to day, I am happy to say.”

“Well, Powell, I will first go with you to look up Miss Roland, and then come back to strike that fellow's trail.”

“Come, I am ready to go.”

They mounted and rode on up the mountain, going at a rapid pace.

The trail led them out near the mine, and Powell called out:

“They have been here!”

“Ah! you see their horses' tracks?”

“Yes, for I know the track of that rawboned animal ridden by Pathfinder, as he has very long and narrow hoofs.”

“See, there are his tracks, and these smaller ones were made by the animal ridden by Miss Roland.”

“I believe you are right, Powell,” and springing from his saddle, Red Lightning strode into the mine.

“Powell, come here!”

The call was earnest, and the doctor at once went to his side.

“See there!”

“The track of Miss Roland's boot.”

“Yes.”

“What does it mean?”

“That she dismounted and came into the mine.”

“Why?”

“Woman's curiosity,” and the doctor shrugged his shoulders.

“And here is evidently the track of the guide.”

“Yes, it is his footprint.”

“Why was he here?”

“I give it up.”

“Now, Powell, let us see if the hoof-tracks lead back toward Golden Gulch.”

They examined slowly outside and decided that Ruby had been led by curiosity to visit the mine, and had entered it, while the guide had followed her example, hoping to pick up in the dirt a piece of gold, be it ever so small.

“Doctor, I do not suspect wrong of the guide, and yet I am anxious, so I have a proposition to make.”

“Well, Hale, out with it.”

“While I follow the trail of Idaho Ike, do you return to Golden Gulch and see if Miss Roland has returned.”

“If so, come back and stay at the cabin tonight, for I wish to talk with you anyhow.”

“If not, come anyhow, and together we will start in search of her.”

“I will gladly do so; but do you think you can overhaul Idaho Ike before night?”

“If I do not, I shall return.”

Thus was it arranged, and while Red Lightning started upon the trail of Idaho Ike, Frank Powell rode on toward the cabin, intending to go that way to Golden Gulch.

CHAPTER XXX.

IDAHO IKE'S FATE.

AFTER leaving Frank Powell at the mine, Red Lightning returned to the scene where he had so nearly lost his life at the hands of the man whom he had treated with mercy.

As I have before said, his experience on the Texas and Mexican border had made him an excellent trailer and he searched the spot for the tracks of his foe with all the cunning and skill of an Indian warrior upon a trail.

Soon he set off in the direction taken by Idaho Ike, when he believed he had killed the miner.

Evidently anxious to get away from the scene as quickly as possible, Idaho Ike had gathered together his gold-bags, arranged them so as to carry them with the greatest ease and set off at a rapid pace, not wholly robbing his enemy, or thinking of his horse in his haste.

Finding his trail Red Lightning followed it unerringly.

His wood-craft told him, by glancing far ahead, which way the fugitive had doubtless selected as his track in carrying the weight he did, and almost invariably he found that he was right.

Once or twice he lost the trail, but he soon found it again, and the result was that he discovered that he was rapidly gaining upon the fugitive.

Before long he descried the form of the robber ahead, trudging along with his load.

He saw, by the nature of the ground that it would be impossible for him to there get ahead of him and thus catch him off his guard by an ambush.

And more, he knew that the ring of the iron shoes of his horse would soon make his pre-

sence known, and that the two would then be upon equal terms as man to man.

Red Lightning was utterly devoid of fear, yet he did not care to risk his life against the worthless existence of the miserable wretch, whom he knew to be a most desperate character, and he had had proof of his unerring aim.

“I have too much to do before I die, to let that fellow shoot me down, even though I kill him.”

“I have been merciful to him, and now I must treat him as I would a mad-dog.”

Just then he turned into a little stream to give his horse water, and was hidden by a large rock and some cedars from the robber.

Presently he heard a voice near by, and instantly listened.

The sound of footfalls he also heard, and at once he was on his guard.

“I were a durned fool ter take that trail, when I knew I'd not git down ther cliff.”

“But I were thinkin' o' my fortin' an' fer-gottin'.

“But it hev put me a clean mile out o' ther way.”

“Waal, ther dust are heavy, but it are precious, an' if I git through all right I won't complain o' carryin' it.”

So said the voice.

It was Idaho Ike coming on the back trail, having thoughtlessly taken a way that led him to the verge of the cliff.

“Hold! you are my game, Idaho Ike!”

The voice was stern and ringing, and the gold-burdened man stood still in his tracks, while he dropped his load to the ground, it falling at his feet.

Not an effort did he make to draw a weapon, for he was white-faced and trembling.

Before him, on horseback, and not ten feet distant, sat Red Lightning, covering him with his revolver.

It was like an apparition from the grave, for he certainly thought that he had killed the miner.

“Lordy! ef it were night, I'd sw'ar yer were a ghost,” groaned, rather than said the man.

“I am a pretty healthy ghost, as you will find, Idaho Ike.

“Up with those thieving hands of yours!”

“I are wounded in 'em, pard!”

“Up with them, I say.”

Taking the wounded hand out of the sling in which it was held, he raised it and the burnt one above his head, while he said:

“Does that suit you?”

“Yes.”

Riding up to him Red Lightning disarmed him and then said:

“Now you spoke of a cliff ahead, I believe?”

“Yas.”

“Where is it?”

“Up ther trail I come a leetle way.”

“We will go there.”

“What fer?”

“I will show you when we reach the spot.”

“Lordy! I thought I'd kilt yer.”

“Yes, and you did come pretty near doing so.”

“Waal, yer don't intend ter hit back, does yer?”

“Yes.”

“Lordy! spar' me ag'in an' see how good I kin be.”

“No, I spared you once, and you showed how bad you could be, so now I intend to let you see that you went too far.”

“Now, I want those hands!”

“What fer?”

“Hold them out and I will show you.”

The man sullenly obeyed, and his arms were bound down securely to his side with his own lariat, which Idaho Ike never went without, though he had no horse to stake out with it.

“Now we'll look up the cliff.”

At the order of Red Lightning the desperado moved on, the miner picking up the buckskin bags of gold, and following.

As Idaho Ike had said, the trail they were on led abruptly to a cliff.

A point of rock jutted out just there, and overhung the valley two hundred feet below.

It was a dizzy height to look down from; but, throwing the bags of gold near the edge, Red Lightning advanced and gazed into the depths below.

“I told yer, yer c'u'dn't go no further this way,” said Idaho Ike.

“You told a lie, for you do go further this way.”

“What is yer talkin' 'bout, pard?” and he turned deadly pale as he asked the question.

“I intend that this spot shall be the scene of your execution.”

“What?”

“I mean it.

“Fate led you here, and here you are fated to die.”

“Yer doesn't intend ter shoot me!”

“No.”

“I are glad o' that.”

“But I intend to hang you.”

“Hang me?”

“Yes.”

“Yer is jokin'.”

“A sad joke it will be to you, Idaho Ike.”

“Lordy! you is cruel.”

“I am just.”

“Come, there is no need of longer delay, for I have made up my mind, and my sudden death can alone prevent my carrying out my intentions regarding you.”

“Come, sir!”

As he spoke, Red Lightning took from his saddle-horn a long and supple lariat.

One end he made fast about the horn of the saddle, and stood his horse with his head facing the cliff, and only a few paces distant from the edge.

“Stand, sir!” he called out to the horse, and the obedient animal placed his forefeet forward as a brace, and leaned back upon his haunches.

Then Red Lightning took the other end of the lariat, in which he had made a noose, and placed it about the neck of the doomed man.

Idaho Ike shrunk from the touch of the rope, but still he seemed to feel that, as Red Lightning had spared him before he would do so again.

“Now, my man, you have just five minutes to live,” and the miner took out his watch.

“Does yer mean ter hang me?”

“I do.”

“No.”

“I mean that you shall spring from this cliff, and be your own executioner.”

“I pull yer horse over, fer I are heavy.”

“I'll risk that.”

“I won't jump.”

“Then I shall simply tie you, and leave you here for wild beasts to feed on.”

“Lordy! this are a horrid place for b'ars an' wolfs.”

“They'd chaw me up quick!”

“Then end your life and your misery by jumping.”

“Yer means it?”

“I swear it!”

“Waal, I thinks yer does mean it now.”

“Two minutes have gone, and if the five go without your taking the fatal leap, I shall tie you, and leave you to the wild beasts.”

The wretch trembled violently, and his face had already turned to the hue of a corpse.

“Another minute gone, Idaho Ike.”

“I'll work fer yer ontill I dies ef yer spar's me!” groaned the unhappy wretch.

“No; you shall die now.”

“Oh, Lordy!”

“Idaho Ike, the five minutes are gone!

“Take the leap, or I leave you to a worse fate!” came the solemn words from the lips of Red Lightning.

With a yell of despair the wretch bounded toward the edge of the cliff, and sprung far out into mid-air, just as the miner called to his horse:

“Stand firm, good horse, and hold his weight!”

CHAPTER XXXI.

STRIKING THE REVENGE TRAIL.

THE quick call that Red Lightning gave to his horse, as he saw the sudden movement of the robber, caused the animal to throw himself back further upon his haunches, and thus brace himself for the strain and the shock which he seemed to fully comprehend would come upon him.

Whether there was a sudden hope that in his death-jump he could accomplish that of Red Lightning, I do not know; but certain it is that Idaho Ike so ran as to throw his enemy upon the inside of the rope, and as if to drag the horse sideways over the cliff, and with him his master, who would be thus

could, and mounting his horse started on his return to his cabin.

It was after dark when he arrived.

But a light shining from the open door told him that the cabin had an occupant.

He knew that it was Powell, and so he hastily put his horse up for the night, and entered his little home.

Frank Powell was pacing to and fro before the blazing fire, as Red Lightning entered and threw his gold-bags in a heap upon the floor.

"Well, those bags tell the story that you caught your man!" said the doctor.

"Yes, and I hope that you were equally as successful."

"No, I regret to say that I was not."

"What! you did not find Miss Roland?" eagerly asked Red Lightning.

"I did not."

"Quick, Powell, tell me what has happened?"

"Well, it can soon be told, Hale.

"I went to Golden Gulch, and found that Miss Roland had not returned.

"Her father, and others were in favor of calling out the Vigilantes and at once making a search.

"But I did not like that plan, for now I am confident that Pathfinder is playing a deep game.

"He has stolen the girl for ransom; and strategy, not a large force, can find him and his captive."

"True, and I agree with you."

"I told the colonel that I pledged myself with your aid, to bring back his daughter, and thus it was arranged, the Vigilantes saying that as the girl's life was in danger, they agreed with me that it was best to still-hunt the guide, rather than pursue him with numbers."

"And I am with you, Powell, heart and hand."

"Now what is to be done?"

"I reached here before sunset, so looked up their trail, following it from the mine.

"I find that they have gone over the mountain, and as the tracks of the guide's horse were ahead, it shows that the animal ridden by Miss Roland was being led."

"Yes, it would seem so."

"Now I know that Pathfinder has a camp somewhere over in the valley beyond, and up toward Miners' Haven, and my idea is that he has taken her to it to open negotiations through some one else for a ransom from her father."

"I hope it is so."

"I feel that it is."

"Of course he will try to cover up his tracks; but I believe that we can trail him, if he does not fly, and I feel hopeful that we can run him to cover."

"Heaven grant it!"

"But think of the utter misery of the poor girl!"

"Oh, she has pluck, and will not give up hope, so don't worry about her."

"Now let us get what sleep we can, for we can do nothing before dawn."

"No; and at the first glimmer of day we will be ready to start, and I really need rest."

"Now tell me, how is Frank King?"

"Improving, and so is poor old Tempest Tom."

"I am glad to know it; but let us get some supper and then retire, for we need all the rest we can have."

"Indeed we do. But you shot Idaho Ike, then?"

"No, I hanged him," and Red Lightning gave a description of his execution of the murderous wretch.

"It served him right; and we will have another of his stripe to execute soon, I hope."

After partaking of supper, the two friends sought rest and were soon fast asleep.

But before dawn they awoke greatly refreshed, ate breakfast, and started upon the trail to run down Pathfinder and avenge his act toward Ruby Roland.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BLACK BROTHERHOOD RECEIVES A VISITOR.

A GLANCE into the secret camp of the Black Brotherhood may interest the reader, especially as an event had happened there which upset the equilibrium of the bandits to a wonderful degree.

The reader will remember that the catching of the horse by Red Lightning, pulled down the log bars at the entrance to the cavern, and that one of the band was curious enough to seek the cause of the noise.

His curiosity cost him his life and he lay where Red Lightning had left him until the following morning.

Then the body was discovered and instantly there was a grand furore in camp.

One thing was evident, and that was that the logs had not been put back in the same manner they had originally been placed in.

This showed that some one had taken them down.

"Who was that some one?" was the question all asked.

The band were all there, and at their feet lay their dead comrade.

Who had killed him?

It certainly must have been one of the band, for who else could have been in their retreat, or have known of it?

Blonde Bill looked black with anger, and let his eyes rest upon the cork-begrimed faces of his men.

Not one of them looked guilty, still there must have been one to do the deed.

The dead man was the most popular member of the band, and he was ever ready to be on the alert against surprise and danger.

He was not known to have had a foe in the Brotherhood.

"One of my horses is missin', cap'n," said one of the men, thus giving a clew to the idea that perhaps it had not been the deed of any member of the outlaw fraternity.

Instantly Blonde Bill ordered all of the horses caught and counted.

But one was certainly missing, and a fine animal at that.

This circumstance, with the fact that the bars had been taken down, showed that the act was not committed by any one of the Brotherhood.

But this added to the mystery, for who could have been the murderer?

As it became evident that some one had been in their midst, it was certainly necessary to look up that foe.

Instantly scouts were sent off to follow the trail, if the trail could be found.

But the scouts looked all day in vain, and returned worn out from their unsuccessful search.

Not daring to leave a stronghold so secure, and fearing that the mysterious foe, whoever he might be, would lead a band of Vigilantes against them, Blonde Bill determined to await the attack there.

So he made all preparations, gave out that no one should leave the valley, and waited.

But two days went by and no foe appeared, greatly to the surprise of all, and Blonde Bill expressed the hope that the one who had killed the member of the Brotherhood, had been so wounded in the combat as to go off and die himself.

One afternoon he thought he would take a stroll out to the other entrance of the cavern, and he accordingly got his lantern and started.

Turning off from the main tunnelway, to have a look into a small passage, he returned once more to the arched way he had left, not knowing that some one had passed him while he was on his little exploring expedition.

Nor did that some one know of the existence of any one else in the cavern, as he slowly went along, a pine torch in his hand, and examining closely the tracks beneath his feet, and evidently made by the hoofs of horses.

The glare of his torch had prevented him from seeing the light of the lantern, which also had kept the flaring pine burning so brightly from being seen by Blonde Bill.

Thus, while the latter was in the little passage the other went by in the open tunnel.

And that one was no other than Pathfinder—the treacherous guide.

He had accidentally struck the trail in the valley, leading to the cavern, and was following it.

He could not understand it, and he determined to find out what it meant.

He had cut a number of pine torches with his bowie-knife, and started to find the end of the trail, lead where it might.

He feared it was made by men on his track, and he wished to know.

How they had found that cavern, of the existence of which he knew nothing, was more than he could understand.

At last he came to the end of the cavern, and beheld the log bars before him.

Taking his torch back into the cave, where its light could not be seen, he again approached the entrance and looked cautiously out.

What he saw brought to his lips the words:

"Ther Black Brotherhood, as I lives!"

He saw men with blackened faces over in the camp, a cabin, horses wandering about, and he knew then that it was none other than the secret retreat of the Black Brotherhood.

"Waal, I wants ter git away from heur now, just as quick as I kin," he muttered, and just as he uttered the words he turned to find a revolver leveled at him, and a masked face level with his own.

"Hands up, or take the consequences!" was the stern command.

"In course my hands goes up, pard, and I is allfired glad to see yer," was the cool answer.

"Oh! you are!"

"I is fer a fact, fer I was lookin' fer yer."

"Looking for me?"

"Waal, I were lookin' fer ther Black Brotherhood an' you looks as though you might be ther cap'n."

"I am."

"Then you is my honey, fer I was goin' ter yer camp."

"How did you know we lived here?"

"Oh! I knows, fer I is a roamer: but I didn't say nothin' o' course, an' now that I hes a leetle biz with yer I just looks yer up."

"You have business with me?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

Pathfinder was a ready liar, and he knew that he was in a dangerous situation, and a thought struck him to get out of it in safety and at the same time with advantage to himself.

"Yer see I hes a valuable piece o' property I wants ter sell."

"The Black Brotherhood do not buy, they steal," was the answer.

"Waal, that's flat-footed anyhow: but I stole this an' I will sell it cheap."

"What kind of property is it?"

"A gal."

"What?"

"Fact, pard cap'n."

"Now what in thunder do I want with a girl as property?"

"Yer see she are valuable, fer I jist yanked her away from hum, knowin' that her folks would give a neat figger ter git her back."

"Ah! I see."

"You kidnapped her?"

"Yes, I nabbed ther kid, an' she are a purty one too, an' well grown."

"Where did you get her?"

"From Golden Gulch."

"Ah! and her people are able to pay?"

"You bet, pard, that I hain't takin' no gal that don't fetch dust."

"You kin git a large sum fer her."

"Well, what do you want for her?"

"Give me five thousand and we'll call it squar."

"You hold her at a high price."

"She are a high gal, pard, as yer'll say when yer sees her."

"Where is she?"

"Not far away."

"Will you bring her here?"

"No, pard, fer I are one ag'in' a gang: but you go with me ter see her, an' I bein' one an' you one, makes us squar."

"You may be leading me into a trap."

"No, pard cap'n, I are actin' squar."

"I'll go with you upon one condition."

"Waal, pard?"

"That you give up your belt of arms to me."

Pathfinder was then under the revolver of Blonde Bill, for he it was who had captured the guide, and so could but agree to his terms, so he said:

"Waal, pard, I shows my actin' is squar' by sayin' agreed."

"How far is it from here?"

"About a leetle under a mile."

"All right, I will take your arms and then go with you."

With this he took off the belt of the guide, and taking up his lantern the two started upon their way to the secret retreat of the kidnapper.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE VALUE OF A VICTIM.

WITHOUT hesitation Pathfinder led Blonde Bill to his retreat, surprising that worthy very much by the discovery of a haunt near him that was almost as secluded as his own.

The guide was determined to sell Ruby to the chief of the Black Brotherhood, get what price he could for her, and then decamp out of a neighborhood that was getting hot for him, he well knew, for he did not doubt but that the most thorough search was being made for the maiden.

"Well, you have certainly a secluded retreat here," said Blonde Bill, as they entered the little vale and the cabin met his eye.

"Yas, pard, it are a nice leetle hidin'-place, an' no mistake."

"Yer see ther gal are in ther cabin."

"Have you any guard over her?"

"No, pard, I hes her tied."

As he spoke he threw open the door and Blonde Bill stepped into the cabin.

There sat Ruby, bound securely to a chair which the guide had made out of cedars.

Her face was pale and haggard but she had a fearless glance in her eyes.

She looked up as the two entered, and heard the exclamation of her masked visitor as he caught sight of her face.

"Great God!" cried Blonde Bill, starting back.

"Ah, sir, I deemed that it was some one to rescue me, but I see that I have nothing to expect from one who hides his face," said Ruby, sadly.

Blonde Bill had forgotten, in recognizing the maiden, that his

high sum," said Ruby, with a scornful curve of her lip; and then she added:

"But may I ask your intention regarding me?"

"To sell you to your friends for every dollar they will pay for your ransom," was the response.

"Well, I can only ask that you lose no time in your sale of me, for I am anxious to get released from the suspense I suffer, and feel that my father suffers for me."

"Well, my man, you want five thousand dollars for this lady?" and Blonde Bill turned to the guide.

"That are ther sum, Cap."

"It would be cheaper to kill you, I guess, but I will not break faith with you—so here is your money."

"You see I go prepared, should I have to emigrate suddenly from these parts."

He took a leather wallet from his pocket as he spoke, and, out of a number of crisp bank-bills, counted out the sum demanded by the guide.

"Them isn't counterfitts, is they, pard?"

"No, I deal in good money only, if I do get it by highway robbery," was the answer.

"Waal, the gal is yourn."

"Good by, miss."

Ruby did not notice the remark of the treacherous scamp, while her purchaser was cutting the thongs that bound her.

"Will I be allowed to take my horse, sir?" she asked.

"Ah, yes; where is he?"

"This man can tell you."

"Ther money don't include ther animal, pard."

"I guess it does, my man, unless you wish to try conclusions with me."

"No; take the critter, for he are over yonder."

Blonde Bill led Ruby from the cabin, carrying her saddle and bridle, and the horse was soon found.

"Well, my man, do you expect to stay in these parts?" he asked, as he raised Ruby to her saddle, while he held the bridle-rein.

"I doesn't know, pard."

"If you wish to join the Black Brotherhood, you know where to find them, and there is a vacancy in the band."

"I'll think o' it, pard."

Blonde Bill said no more, but walked off, leading Ruby's horse, and leaving the guide standing looking after them.

After a short while they came to the cavern, the lantern was taken from its hiding-place, and they went through the dark and dismal retreat.

Ruby said nothing to her guard, and he too was silent, and at last they emerged from the cavern, and appeared in the camp, to the surprise of the members of the band.

Seeing Helen, Ruby's heart gave a bound of joy, for she felt that she would have the companionship of one of her own sex.

She was struck with the startling beauty of the woman, and, a reader of human nature, she saw that there was little hope for her with the outlaw queen.

"Helen, I have just purchased this lady from a fellow who kidnapped her from Golden Gulch, knowing that he would get a good price for her."

"I leave her in your care," said Blonde Bill to his sister, as he lifted Ruby from the saddle.

"I will see that she does not escape, Will."

"Your name, please?" asked the woman.

"I am Miss Roland," was the haughty reply.

"And I am Miss Weldon, and your hostess and your guard while you are here," said Helen Weldon, in a tone of cold reserve.

Ruby's heart sunk within her at this reception from one who she had hoped would have some sympathy for her.

Still she was glad to be with the woman, under the circumstances, and only said:

"I am very tired, and would like to rest, if you please."

"Certainly," and Helen led the way into the cabin, while Blonde Bill walked away to consult with Black Bill as to the best way to get word to Colonel Roland that his daughter was the captive of the Black Brotherhood, and would be held for ransom.

He found Black Bill among the pines, for he had discovered who was the fair captive, and had kept out of sight, fearing for her to see him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FALSE TO HER SEX.

THAT Ruby Roland thought that Helen Weldon was very beautiful there was no doubt, for the robber queen really was most lovely in face and form, and had the air of an empress in manner and carriage.

But Ruby soon discovered that she was utterly devoid of heart.

She was dressed richly, in spite of her strange attire, wore precious stones in great number, and would have created a sensation among any gathering of beautiful women.

But her lovely eyes were treacherous, and her heart was cold and merciless.

She was polite, and did all she could to enter-

tain her captive, while she placed before her the best food the camp could supply, the two eating together away from the men, for Blonde Bill and his lieutenant would not risk recognition by going near the maiden.

With no hope in her heart that the woman would aid her, still Ruby determined to make an effort to see what she would do.

It was the day after her arrival in the camp of the Brotherhood, and late in the afternoon.

The two were seated in front of the cabin, the outlaw queen engaged in running her fingers lightly over the strings of a guitar, and now and then seeming to burst forth involuntarily with some sweet ballad.

Just after she had sung one of touching pathos, Ruby said, softly:

"You have an exquisite voice, Miss Weldon."

"Thank you."

"One with your beauty and accomplishments seems wholly out of place here," continued Ruby.

"You are equally beautiful and even more accomplished, and you are here," was the response.

"Yes, but I am out in this country with my father, and he is all that I have to love, so must live where he does."

"And my brother is all that I have in the world, and I live where he does."

"I should think you would try to win him from the life he leads."

"No, he knows what is best."

"Once he was honorable, and had a bright career before him."

"But Fate was ever so hard upon him, and the result is that he is now what he is, and it cannot be helped."

"One of these days, when we get rich enough, we may live elsewhere and enjoy life; but it will be some time before we can do that, as a fortune is not made in a day by highway tax-gathering."

"Oh! but it is such a life to lead."

"I like the excitement of it," was the cool response.

"I hope that it has not made you heartless."

"You hope without reason, for it has."

"Not utterly so?"

"Yes, utterly."

"Then would it be useless for me to beg you to secretly let me go?"

"It would."

"Sometimes I fear that your brother does not intend to offer me for ransom."

"If you are content to remain here and become his wife, he will be most happy, for he loves you."

"His wife?" cried Ruby, in a tone of terror.

"Yes."

"An outlaw's wife?"

"Many women have been worse."

"Never! never! I would die by my own hand first."

"Then he will sell you to your father for what he can get."

"Alas! my father is not a rich man."

"He is not a poor man."

"Yes, for he lost his fortune some years ago, and only has now his salary as manager of the mine at Golden Gulch, and perhaps several thousand dollars laid up."

"He will have to pay well for you if he wants you."

"He is unable to do so."

"My brother gave five thousand for you."

"True, but he did not give it in good faith."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I heard him tell you that he went, with several of his men, back to the cabin to kill the guide and get his money back."

"Yes, he had no idea of letting the fellow have the money, and also hold the secret of our retreat."

"But he did not find the guide?"

"No, he had gone."

"And you uphold this treacherous act of your brother?"

"Certainly; I uphold any act which he does for the interest of himself and the band."

"Then I appeal to you in vain when I beg you to let me return to my father?"

"You do."

"See here, I have these diamond earrings, and these jeweled rings."

"And more, I have my father's money with me, amounting to twenty-two hundred dollars."

"I offer all to you to let me go."

"The jewels are worth perhaps fifteen hundred dollars, and they, with the money, would amount to thirty-seven hundred, while my brother is out five thousand."

"No, his price for you is just ten thousand dollars, and that sum alone can buy your freedom," and running her fingers across the strings of her guitar, the strange and heartless woman, false to her own sex, began to sing a plaintive melody, in a voice of exquisite beauty and pathos, that was enough to bring tears to the eyes of one who listened.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BLACK BILL'S PLEDGE.

BLACK BILL, the lieutenant of the Black Brotherhood, certainly kept out of sight of Ruby Roland the captive of his chief.

He felt heartily ashamed of himself for the

act he had committed, after his pledge to her in the Gold Brick Hotel, when she let him and Blonde Bill go free.

He had, with Blonde Bill so broken that pledge, that not half an hour after it was made they had shot down the two men whom Frank Powell had sent to guard them out of Golden Gulch.

Caught as they were in outlawry, they would have been quickly hanged, had not Frank Powell left it to Ruby Roland what their fate should be.

She had spared them, and they had returned the kindness as stated.

Now they had in their power that very girl who had set them free, and Black Bill knew that his chief was talking of forcing her to become his wife.

With his mask on Black Bill would go to the cabin on some excuse and talk to Helen, while he looked at Ruby, drinking in her beauty until his heart went forth with love for her, outlaw though he was.

One day Blonde Bill called to his sister and said:

"Helen, do you wish to take a little trip with me?"

"Yes, I will call one of the men to look after Miss Roland," she answered.

"I will act as guard, Miss Weldon, for your captive," said Black Bill approaching.

"Thank you, and I shall hold you responsible for her."

"You may do so."

Helen Weldon took up her hat and walked away with her brother, and Black Bill threw himself into the chair which she had vacated, and he was just opposite to Ruby.

The captive had before noticed him, and been struck with his elegant form and courtly manner, while she had wondered that such a man could be a hunted outlaw.

For a moment after the departure of the chief and his sister there was silence, which Black Bill broke at last with:

"You look pale and haggard, miss, under your confinement."

"Do you wonder at it, sir, when I suffer the suspense I do?"

"No, I do not wonder, and I pity you."

Ruby started, for perhaps at last she had found a friend, even if he was an outlaw.

"You pity me?" she said.

"Yes, deeply."

"I thought that pity was foreign to an outlaw's breast."

"It does not so follow."

"I failed to find such a thing in the breast of that queenly woman."

"She is utterly without heart," he answered.

"So I discovered, and I fear her brother is the same."

"Equally so."

"And you?"

"I said that I pitied you."

"And you mean it?"

"I do."

"Then why not aid me?"

"How?"

"Allow me to escape from this horrible place."

"I will."

Ruby again started, and the hot blood rushed into her face with joy.

"Do you mean it?" she gasped.

"Yes."

"Why are you thus kind to me?"

"Can I tell you frankly?"

"Certainly."

"Because I love you."

"Ah me!" and Ruby sighed, for her hope vanished, as she felt that her supposed friend would demand the same as his chief—that she should become his wife.

"It is true, I love you," he repeated.

"Why, you have not even seen me twice before to-day."

"Oh, yes, I have, for I have often been watching you when you did not know it."

"I think it an honor to a woman to win the love of a man; yet I cannot feel that your love is an honor."

"I could become different for your sake," he said, eagerly.

"Become different for your own sake."

He removed his mask, and she saw that he spoke the truth.

"You pledged your word to me that you would reform, and lead an honorable life, and you broke faith by killing a man who was escorting you out of Golden Gulch."

"I meant to kill him, I admit; but he, Tempest Tom, is the one who escaped death, while my companion, Blonde Bill, my chief, killed the other."

"Oh! why did you break your pledge?"

"It was the devil in my nature, I suppose; but I wish to atone for it now by setting you free."

"Oh! if you will only do this, I will give you what I offered that beautiful fiend to aid me, and which is all that my father and myself are worth."

"No, I would not touch one dollar of your money."

"But I will set you free."

"When?"

"To-night."

"Oh! thank you for those words."

"Now, let me tell you my plan."

"Gladly will I listen."

"I have with me a bottle of chloroform, which I had when I was wounded."

"I will give it to you, and to-night, when Miss Weldon is asleep, hold your handkerchief, saturated with the chloroform, to her nose."

"When you find she is unconscious, get up, take her dress and hat, and walk boldly out of the cavern to yonder rocks."

"Then follow at their base to the mouth of the cavern, and there I will join you."

"But I heard the chief say that a guard was kept at the cavern entrance since one of the band was mysteriously killed some time ago."

"It is at the entrance of the cavern leading into the valley that he stands."

"But I will look after him, and more, I will have your horse ready in the cave for you, and my own, for I will guide you to within sight of Golden Gulch."

"Oh! you will have redeemed your pledge if you will do this."

"But where will you go?"

"Adrift somewhere; and try, for the sake of the love I bear you, to lead a better life."

"God grant it!"

"But may I not give Miss Weldon too much chloroform and kill her?"

"It would matter little if you did; but you can easily judge of how much she will stand."

"If you cannot do so to-night, try it to-morrow night, or the next, for I will be at my post nightly until you are free, as I am confident that Blonde Bill does not intend to free you."

Ruby turned pale at this, and seeing the brother and sister returning, she was forced to remain silent.

But her heart beat high with hope, for she felt that Black Bill would keep his pledge.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

IN THE TOILS.

PATHFINDER did not like the perfect trust which the outlaw captain seemed to place in him, knowing that he held the secret of his retreat.

It looked suspicious, and the more he thought of it the more he felt that he ought to be upon his guard.

"I'll light out an' hide ther horse an' watch fer awhile," he said.

He accordingly did what he could to make the cabin have the air of being deserted wholly, and then rode his horse off to a canyon, where he securely hid him.

Then back to the retreat he went and concealed himself in a crevice of the rocks.

He had not long to wait before he discovered that his suspicions were correct, for suddenly into the little valley came Blonde Bill and several of his band.

That he was the object of their coming he well knew, for they approached the cabin with the greatest caution.

He saw them enter it, and heard the oath of disappointment uttered by Blonde Bill at finding his intended victim gone.

Then they departed, and Pathfinder felt secure once more.

Going after his horse he brought him back to the valley, for he did not wish to try to leave the country, while he was confident that the Vigilantes were scouring it in all directions in search of him.

"This place are all right, an' heur I stays, until arter ther Black Brotherhood sells ther gal to her pa."

"Then I kin light out, and I'll do it."

"But I'll watch ther cavern close ter see when she is took ter ther Gulch."

Having decided upon this plan he took up a safe position at dawn every day, from whence he could watch the entrance to the cavern, and there he remained until night, so that no one could go out of, or enter the cave without his seeing it.

One day, after he had been steadily on the watch for nearly a week, he went off without taking anything to eat with him from his cabin.

Discovering this fact, and being one who

made it a rule never to go hungry, he returned to the cabin to get his dinner.

He walked up to the door, undid the fastening and stepped within, to utter a cry of alarm, as he found himself in the clutch of a man whose strength dwarfed his own.

And worse still, behind him was another who had followed him into the cabin.

One had been crouched in the little hut, and the other, after fastening him in there, had gone elsewhere to hide.

"Well, Pathfinder, we have you safe in our toils," said one.

"Doc, thar hain't no doubt o' thet fact," was the cool response.

"And where is Miss Roland, you scamp?" asked Red Lightning.

"Hain't she at home?"

"You know that she is not, and I am going to make you tell the truth," was the stern reply of Doctor Powell.

"Oh! I'll tell ther truth, yer kin sw'ar, Doc, fer I recognizes that I are in a awkward posish."

"So awkward that you will hang for it."

"Oh Lord o' Jerusalem! does yer mean it?"

"I do!"

"Waal, I are one ter look out fer myself, an' durn ther rest o' em, so ef yer is willin' ter make tarms jist say so."

"What terms?"

"Waal, Doc, ef you an' Red Lightnin' is willin' ter promise me my life an' my dust, I'll give ther secret away."

"What secret?"

"Do you promise?"

"I promise nothing."

"Nor I."

"Then jist hang me, fer yer gits no knowledge out o' me."

They knew the dogged resolution of the man, and Red Lightning said:

"Do you mean to say that you will tell where Miss Roland is if we will spare your life?"

"And my dust."

"We are no thieves to take your money."

"Waal, what does yer say?"

"Has harm befallen her?"

"Nary."

"Then, if she has met with no harm at your hands, I make the promise."

"And you, Doc."

"I will do as Mr. Hale says."

"All right."

"I hev sold her."

"Sold her?" asked both men in amazement.

"Yes, I sold her ter a man who are ter sell her fer what she are wu'th ter her pa."

"He has not done so."

"So I knows, fer I bes been watchin' him."

"And who is this man?"

"They is know'd as the Black Brotherhood!"

This was a startling piece of information, and when Pathfinder went on to give a clear statement of the facts of the case, both Red Lightning and Doctor Powell were amazed.

"Well, guide, if you serve us well in this matter, I'll give you a thousand dollars to add to the money you were paid by the outlaw, and we will see that you get out of the country unharmed," said Red Lightning.

"That are durned squar', an' I agrees, pard."

"Then now to work, and we must lose no time."

"You can go to the haunt of the Black Brotherhood?"

"Yas, it are in a cavern not far away."

"Yes, I know the spot, and we were going to give those devils a call, after we had found Miss Roland."

"But we trailed you here, and had no idea that you were connected with them," said Red Lightning.

"Nor I wouldn't hev been, but ter save my life when ther cap'n caught me in ther cave."

"Well, you must go to the Black Brotherhood and tell the captain that you are just from Miners' Haven, and know that an ambulance, loaded with gold-dust is to pass down the eastern mountain trail to-night, on the way to Golden Gulch."

"I sees, pard."

"Tell him that there will be half a dozen men with the ambulance, so that he will take the greater part of his band."

"After you get there, as the vehicle will not pass, you can tell them that something must have delayed it, and that you will go to Miners' Haven and find out the cause, returning to their retreat to let them know when it will be y."

"Of course you must ask for a good share of the gold, and thus lead them to think that you are their friend."

"I'll do it, pard."

"Now go, and if you act square, we will be square."

"If you do not, we'll hunt you down if you go to the earth's end."

"I'll be squar', you kin bet, fer I gits off easy arter what I hes did."

"But whar will I see you arter I goes with their Brotherhood?"

"Come back to the cavern close on their trail, and you may lend a helping hand in their capture."

"I will take your money now, to keep as a sign of your good faith, and return it to you

with that I promised you, when you have done your work right."

"That are O. K., and I are off," and five minutes after the guide started upon his mission.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE RESCUE.

TRUE to his word, and flattering himself that he had escaped with good luck, instead of ill-fortune as he deserved, Pathfinder went to the cavern mounted upon his rawboned, but tough and fleet horse.

He lighted his way through with pine torches, until he suddenly heard in a deep voice:

"Stand!"

"I does, you bet!"

"Who are you?"

"A pard o' ther cap'n, an' I hes news fer him."

"Are you alone?"

"I are."

"Throw up your hands!"

The crider was obeyed most promptly.

"Now march forward, sir!"

Again the guide moved on, holding his torch above his head, while behind him, covering him with a revolver, walked the guard.

At the cavern entrance the guard called to some of his comrades, and the intruder was led before the chief.

"Ah! it is you, is it?" said Blonde Bill recognizing him.

"It are."

"And what brings you here?"

"My horse!"

"And why have you come?"

"Ter strike a leetle bargain with yer."

"Well, what is it?"

"Does yer want some gold?"

"Who does not?"

"Waal, cap'n, I hes been snoopin' 'round sin' I seen yer, an' ther fact o' ther biz be that I hev found out a leetle secret."

"And you wish to cor fide it to me?"

"I does."

"I am ready, so what is it?" and Blonde Bill felt that his visitor had something important to communicate.

"Yer knows Miners' Haven?"

"Yes."

"Waal, thar is a ambulance that is goin' ter start from thar fer Golden Gulch, an' it are ter carry a big lot o' dust."

"No!"

"Fact!"

"It are ter go down ther eastern trail, and ter run by night, so as ter dodge any agents that might be looking fer it."

"When does it start?"

"Ter-night."

"Ha! and will pass down the eastern trail to-night?"

"Yas, an' come in about nine mile o' here."

"And will get there about midnight?"

"Jist about."

"We'll be there."

"I thought yer w'u'd, an' I'll go with yer; but I claims a snug leetle sum fer tellin' yer ther secret."

"You shall have it, I assure you; and more, I must have you for a member of the Brotherhood, as we need a man that has the nerve you have."

"Thankee, pard, I'll jine ef yer says so, fer it bain't so durned safe fer me ter go prowlin' 'round alone."

"But yer'll hev ter take yer band, as ther will be half a dozen men with the ambulance."

"I'll take all but two."

"Now to haul him one side, for I do not wish her to know that I killed him."

He dragged the body into a dark recess of the cavern, and then gathered up the torches which he would need to light him through the dismal place.

"Now I must wait for her to do her part, as that wild-cat of a woman would fight like a tigress, if I attempted to release the girl now."

"Move and you die, sir!"

"Great God!" broke from the lips of Black Bill, as he felt upon either shoulder a heavy clutch, and beheld in the darkness two tall forms confronting him.

He was fairly caught, so dared offer no resistance.

"Who are you?" he gasped.

"My name is Horace Hale, sir, and this gentleman is Frank Powell.

"In Golden Gulch we are known as Red Lightning and the Magic Doctor," was the cool reply.

"Then I am doomed."

"Very likely, so now let us see who you are."

They led him out into the starlight, and Red Lightning pulled off his mask.

"Ha! Black Bill!"

"Yes, so I am known in Golden Gulch."

"One of the Black Brotherhood band?"

"Yes, I need not deny it."

"I thought you belonged to the Tax-gatherers?"

"Blonde Bill and myself threw our lot with the Brotherhood."

"He is now their chief, and I am his lieutenant," was the response with a reckless laugh.

"How many men are in camp?"

"I am the last."

"You just killed a man on guard?"

"Yes."

"Had you not done so, we would have killed him. But why did you take his life?"

Black Bill was silent for an instant, and Doctor Powell repeated the question of Red Lightning.

"I will tell you, gentlemen."

"I killed him to accomplish what you have come here for."

"And what is that?"

"To rescue that poor girl, Miss Roland, from Blonde Bill's power."

"Has harm befallen her?" and Red Lightning's voice trembled as he asked the question.

"No; but I found that he did not intend to surrender her to her father, but instead, would have forced her into a hateful marriage with him, and I determined to save her."

"What! are you getting good?" sneered Doctor Powell.

"I am not so bad as to see her suffer when she saved me from hanging."

"This is doubtless a story to save your life now."

"No, for you can ask Miss Roland."

"In a little while she was to be here—at least as soon as she had chloroformed Helen Weldon."

"The sister of Blonde Bill?"

"Yes."

"I wish to see her, and I wish to take her brother alive," said Red Lightning in a low, earnest tone.

"Well, you can do both, if you do not dread attacking the band upon their return; and I believe you are just the men to take the chances."

"I think so myself; and, Black Bill, after we have seen Miss Roland, and she confirms your story of your intention to rescue her, I will set you free, if Doctor Powell says so."

"I certainly say so; and if he wishes to show his good faith, he can help us make the capture of the band."

"I will do so."

Then the three talked over the best plan for capturing Blonde Bill and his men upon their return, and had decided just what to do, when they saw a slender form coming rapidly toward the entrance to the cavern.

"Miss Roland!" called out Red Lightning.

"Yes, and I know that voice among a thousand," cried Ruby, earnestly, as she sprung forward.

Instantly her hands were grasped by Red Lightning and Dr. Powell, while Black Bill stood in silence looking on, his arms crossed upon his broad breast.

A few words of joy from the rescued girl, and then Dr. Powell asked:

"Miss Roland, your presence here confirms what this man has said, that he was aiding you to escape."

"Yes, he has been most kind, and was to take me to Golden Gulch to-night, so please do not harm him," she said, warmly.

"No, he is free to go his way as soon as Blonde Bill and his band are in our power," answered Red Lightning.

Then they told Ruby of their plot, and she urged them to hasten to the cabin and see if she had harmed Helen Weldon, for she said:

"I held the chloroform to her nose until I could not rouse her, and then I hastily dressed and escaped from the cabin."

They went to the cabin, and found that the woman was just awakening from her stupor.

Quickly Ruby took every weapon from the cabin, and then said:

"Dress yourself, Miss Weldon, for the camp is in the possession of my friends."

"Your friends! My brother! Quick, what has happened?" gasped the woman, springing from the bed.

"My friends have come to rescue me, and your brother will soon be a prisoner."

"Never! I will save him!"

Hastily she threw on her clothing, and glancing at Ruby, looked about for her weapons.

"Girl, I will kill you!" she hissed.

"No, Helen Weldon, you will do no such thing," and Red Lightning stepped into the cabin.

She shrank back, crying:

"Horace Hammond!"

"Yes, the avenger of my poor sister Lois, and her husband, Edgar Elgin, whom you and your brother, William Weldon, dogged through life and then killed, or hired assassins to kill."

"I know all your vile acts, Helen Weldon, and I have been long on your track."

"You tried to drive me away from poor Ed's mine by playing ghost, but I did not leave, and I have tracked you to the bitter end."

"See here!" and he began to draw off his gloves:

"I was coming to see poor Ed and Lois, and my guide, a man known as Lucky Pete, was shot down most mysteriously."

"He intrusted, to my keeping, his earnings, and then he died while I rode on for aid."

"A gang, known as the Seven Stars, came upon me shortly after I reached the cabin, and found Ed and Lois dead."

"They had come upon poor Lucky Pete, and said that he suspected me as his murderer."

"Appearances were against me, and they took Lucky Pete's money, my own, and then branded me here as you see."

"In this hand you see they burnt with red-hot iron the word Thief."

"In this hand behold the brand of Murderer."

"Then they set me free, thinking I would fly from the country."

"But I did not, for I vowed revenge, and I owe these brands to you, for you caused poor Ed and Lois to fly to this wild land."

"Now, beautiful wretch that you are, I will make you secure until your brother is hanged, and then, this man, Black Bill, shall see you out of this country, and woe be to you if you come here again."

She uttered no word, and sunk white and stern into a chair, to which she was securely bound.

"Now, Miss Roland, you kindly be her guard, while we capture her brother and his gang," said Red Lightning, and the three men went back to the cavern.

They had a long time to wait, but at last, just as the sun rose, the hoof-falls of the returning outlaws were heard in the cavern.

Nearer and nearer they came, and then in the dark cavern suddenly there flashed forth a half a dozen lightning-like revolver shots, and six horsemen dropped to the ground, while Blonde Bill was seized and dragged from his horse.

He made a desperate struggle, but it was in vain, for he was quickly bound hand and foot.

"Yer scooped 'em all, pard," cried Pathfinder, riding up.

"Yes, and this man hangs; put that lariat about his neck," sternly said Red Lightning, dragging the prisoner to the entrance of the cavern.

"Ha! Hammond, I am your prisoner, am I?" sneered the wretch.

"You are, and you shall soon be my victim, and my revenge is ended," was the cold reply.

"And my sister?"

"She goes her way as she pleases, when you are dead."

"Now up with him!"

The end of the lariat was thrown over the limb of a tree near by, and with no word upon his lips for mercy, Blonde Bill was dragged up into the air and there left hanging.

"Now, Black Bill, we leave the camp, the woman, and the dead in your hands, and warn you never to be seen more in these parts, you, Helen Weldon, and you, Pathfinder," sternly said Red Lightning, as he walked away, accompanied by Doctor Powell.

Ten minutes after three horses left the outlaw camp, and their riders were Horace Hammond, Frank Powell, and the happy Ruby, and their destination was Golden Gulch.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FARO FRED TO THE FRONT.

DURING the time that had passed, and the scenes related in the preceding chapters, the wounded youth, Frank King, had greatly improved, and was able to move about his room.

A deep interest was felt in him by Faro Fred and Major Suggs, who constantly visited him, and his room was a haven of retreat for the poor colonel in his hours of anguish about his daughter.

The Bonanza mine was in such a condition

that Colonel Roland was forced to be there the greater part of each day, and it was only by hard work that he could drive away the agonizing thoughts regarding Ruby's fate.

He felt hopeful, for he knew that Dr. Powell and Red Lightning were upon the trail of her captor, and he was aware that no two better men could be found upon the border to hunt down the treacherous guide.

They had sent him word that they would follow to the bitter end, and he had every confidence in them, and all at Golden Gulch who felt deeply for him in his sorrow, told him that when the entire Vigilante force would fail Hale and Powell would succeed, as in being together they could move secretly, when a number could not.

When at the hotel, the colonel was wont to seek the room of Frank King.

He found the youth very intelligent, refined, and possessed of most winning manners.

About him, he knew nothing whatever, nor did he care any more than about the antecedents of Faro Fred, whom he regarded as his friend.

As for Frank King, he had won the hearts of all at the hotel whom he met, though there were some growlers against him.

They were of a class of men who were always ready to seek trouble, and to bring discredit upon any one that they could.

They hinted first that there was something very mysterious about the way the young man had been brought to the hotel.

Nobody had ever seen or heard of him before, that they could find out.

Red Lightning had remained to hunt up the Tax-gatherers alone, when the whole force of Vigilantes had failed in the work, and this was a suspicious circumstance.

Then, too, Dr. Powell had brought with him the wounded youth, and said that he was a friend of Red Lightning.

Also he had said he had been wounded by a bear.

This was all they could find out about Frank King, and, not being able to discover more, they set him down as a mysterious personage who must be watched.

Had either Frank Powell or Red Lightning been in Golden Gulch, these rumors would have quickly stopped.

But the very absence of the two men, although they were known to be away upon the trail of Idaho Ike, who had kidnapped Ruby Roland, made matters worse.

Major Suggs heard these growlings and spoke to Monk Harris about them.

"Durn ther gossipin' cats, they'll skulk as soon as Doc an' Red Lightnin' comes back, you bet," was the answer.

"But they even threaten the boy with harm, Monk," urged the major.

"They does?"

"Yes."

"That are bad, fer when durn fools gits mischief inter ther heads, they is idjits o' a oncomon order."

"I hes ter go out on ther hearse, major, but you speak ter Faro Fred about it, fer he are a king bee in sich matters."

So the major, still hearing the suspicious growling, went up to Faro Fred's room.

As usual, it being in the forenoon, Faro Fred was asleep.

But he was awake in an instant, and opening the door, cried:

"Come in, major."

"Any good news? Got Miss Roland yet?"

"No, Fred, but I have come to have a talk with you."

"Why in thunder don't you come in the daytime, major?"

"It is daytime now, Fred."

"Bah! it is only eleven o'clock A. M.," he said, looking at his watch, and he added:

"It is night for me until 12 M., always, major."

"Not under circumstances when you are needed, Fred."

"True; I'll quit grumbling and bear you."

"But you aroused me out of a delightful dream, for I was just hanging, in my mind, Blonde Bill, Black Bill and Idaho Ike."

"You were officiating as parson, Powell was pulse-feeler to see when they were dead, that sad-faced, noble fellow, Red Lightning, was chief mourner, and Lanky was undertaker."

"You see what you broke in on, major."

"I hope we'll have it come true, for you have told your dream before breakfast, Fred."

"I hope so; now to business."

"You know that young fellow, Frank King?"

"Do I?"

"I should think so, for don't I read to him by the hour? and he is a splendid fellow."

"I tell you, Major Simon Suggs, if that youth had a sister, and God grant he has, I'll look her up and marry her, just because I know she is lovely."

"Suppose she be already married?"

"Then I'll shoot her husband, or win all of his money so as to make him commit suicide, and thus make a widow of her."

"I am glad you like him, Fred."

"I do, I assure you."

"Well, he is in trouble."

"What! has he gotten fat on your hash and refractured his broken ribs?"

"No."

"Rebroken his arm, perhaps, crookin' his elbow to drink your abominable gin?"

"No; he does not drink."

"He is right; but what is the trouble?"

"The devils down-stairs say he is a mysterious and suspicious character."

"Ab! they do?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"They say they think he is one of the Tax-gatherers to whom Red Lightning and Doc Powell took a liking and brought here."

"Ab! they do?"

"Yes; and just now a gang of them were talking of stringing him up."

"No?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"They said they would do Golden Gulch a favor, and make an example of a bad character."

"I declare, how virtuous they are becoming!"

"But who are they, major?"

"Bandy, Montana Nat, Eagle, Swag, Dot—"

"Never mind the rest of them, major, for these names are sufficient to tell me just who they are."

"Now, I'll slip on my clothes and go to King's room, and you post me as to the intentions of the gentleman down-stairs."

"I'll do it; and I knew you would respond if I told you."

"Ah, yes, I'll be there with pleasure, major, and don't you forget it!"

"Only don't let the boys know that I am there, you know."

"I will not; only don't expose yourself, Fred."

"I'll not take cold, major," was the significant reply, as Major Simon Suggs left the room.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN OBSTACLE IN THE WAY.

WHEN Major Simon Suggs went down-stairs he found the storm had increased to a tempest against the youth lying wounded up-stairs.

He heard loud threats to hang him, and attempting to pour oil upon the troubled waters, he found that it but added to the anger of the men.

"Wait until Red Lightning and Powell return," he said, "and they will tell you who and what the boy is."

No, they would not wait, and would act promptly.

Just then Colonel Roland entered the hotel, having come from his mine, upon hearing from a passing miner that there was some excitement at the hotel.

Not knowing the nature of it, he at once thought that it might concern Ruby.

"Go to the room of King, colonel, and be well armed, for they mean harm to the boy," said the major in a whisper.

The colonel walked away, and, as he did so, the storm broke out in fury.

"Hang him, pard."

"He are a Tax-gatherer!"

"He hain't wounded at all."

"It are a blind!"

"No outlaws hidin' here!"

Such were the cries now heard, and finding in one, Giant Jack, a leader, the mob of rum-crazed men, a score or more in numbers, ascended the stairs toward the room of Frank King, the major in vain trying to keep them back by entreaties.

Just as they neared the room the door was thrown open and Faro Fred appeared.

He was bare-headed, in his shirt sleeves, top-boots and pants, and his superb form was displayed to perfection.

About his slender waist was his belt in which were two revolvers.

"What is the circus, gentlemen?" he asked coolly and with his sweetest smile.

The crowd halted and Giant Jack cried:

"Faro Fred, we wants thet gerloot they calls King, an' we means to hang him."

"You don't say so?"

"We does."

"Don't try it on, Brute Jack."

"Does yer call me a brute?" shouted the bully.

"I called you by a name that is branded upon your face."

"Now don't press the matter, for you can't have the youth for any such purpose."

"But we will."

"You are determined on that?"

"We is."

"And I am quite as determined that you shall not."

"Waal, thar hain't nobody ter hinder us, sayin' it are you."

"You'll find me something of an obstacle in your way if you try it on," and Faro Fred took from a table near the door two revolvers.

"Is that yer game, Faro Fred?"

"Yes, and I call you," was the cool reply.

"Boys, we doesn't want ter harm ther gambler, fer we'll git inter trouble; but we does want ther gerloot, so I says take him."

The desperado moved forward as he spoke, and instantly he was followed with a rush by the crowd.

How it all happened few knew, but there was the rattle of revolvers, groans, heavy falls, and the mob fled in wild disorder, leaving six of their number dead in the hallway, and Faro Fred standing in the door, cool, unharmed and smiling.

"Come, major, get the stiffs out of your hotel, and send them to be buried at my expense," he called out to Major Simon Suggs, who quivering said:

"Fred, you are a terror."

"Don't mention it, my dear major; but tell the bone-planter he will have to make an extra box for Giant Jack, unless he saws a foot off his legs."

"Mind you, bury them at my expense, and throw in drinks for the mourners."

Turning into the room, while the major went to obey his command *verbatim et literatim*, Faro Fred said to Frank King:

"Well, my young friend, they will not trouble you again."

"I should think not," said Colonel Roland, who stood near, his revolvers in hand, to take a share in the fighting if need be.

Then he added:

"I will go down-stairs and see the result."

"If you need me, colonel, hail me," cried out Fred.

"I will," and the door closed upon him.

"Oh, sir, you have been so good to me," come from the lips of Frank King almost in a wail, and then, to the horror of Faro Fred, he burst into a torrent of weeping.

"Good God!" said Faro Fred in a suppressed tone.

After a few moments King arose perfectly calm and approached Faro Fred.

"Mr. Fairbanks, I have deceived you, for I am not what I seem."

"I am a woman!"

"So I just now suspected," said Fred in a low tone.

"Yes, I am a poor, unfortunate girl, who, to save my father from financial ruin, was forced into a marriage with a man who held him in his power.

"The day I married him, feeling that I had sacrificed myself, I left him, and then I found that the story of my father's expected ruin was not true, but a plot against me."

"And more, my father mysteriously died, afterward I found out, poisoned by my husband, for I was his heiress."

"An assassin then struck at my life, and I found out that it was my husband in disguise."

"He believed me dead, and I very nearly lost my life, and I allowed him to believe so."

"But the money of mine which he expected to get, he failed to secure by an act of his own, which sent him a fugitive from justice to the West to save his neck from the hangman's noose."

"Mr. Fairbanks, my nature is revengeful, and, having suffered so deeply from that man, and from one other, his ally in all his plot against me, and his crimes, I sought him out."

"I disguised myself as a man, this is a wig I wear, wholly different from my own hair, and this mustache is false."

"My maiden name was Fanchita Kingsley, and I changed it to Frank King."

"The man I seek is William Weldon, known on this border as Blonde Bill."

"I had found his haunt, joined his band, and was waiting and plotting to entrap him alive, with his sister, and carry him back to the States to be hanged, while she should go to prison for her crimes."

"Now you know just who and what I am."

"I thank you, Miss Kingsley, for your confidence."

"I will not call you by your married name, for I pledge you that you shall soon be a widow, so leave your revenge in my hands."

"Now tell me, does Hale know you as you are?"

"He knows that I am a woman, for when I was wounded he discovered that fact; but I did not tell him more."

"And Powell?"

"Also knows that I am a woman; but no more."

"Very well; but you will tell them your story, or permit me to do so?"

"Yes."

"It is all I ask— Ha! what is this row going on now down-stairs?"

Seizing his revolvers, as he heard the name of Colonel Roland loudly called, Faro Fred rushed out of the room, and the disguised woman, the wronged wife of Blonde Bill, was alone.

CHAPTER XL.

CONCLUSION.

all of whom had suddenly turned from discussing his pluck and deadly aim, with remarks of: "Served 'em right fer wantin' ter hang ther boy," to welcoming into their midst Frank Powell, Red Lightning, and Ruby Roland.

They had arrived in the stage, which Monk Harris had met upon his outward trip, and offered a hundred dollars to the driver to exchange places with him, so that he

"Cu'd sail ther returned angil an' her pards inter Golden Gulch, an' whoop up ther town with ther moosic o' thar gettin' back ag'in."

The offer was accepted, and Monk Harris blew himself deaf in sounding his stage-horn as he dashed into Golden Gulch, and drew rein at the Gold Brick.

Right into her father's arms had Ruby sprung from the step of the coach, and all the way to her room it was one glad shout of welcome from the crowd, excepting those who had been in the fracas to hang the disguised woman, and they skulked off when they saw that Frank Powell and Red Lightning had returned, and would be most ready to hold them responsible for their act in the tragedy they had engaged in.

Once in her room and Ruby told her father all that had happened, while Frank Powell, in a few words, made known to those about him the thrilling scene though which they had passed, and how Red Lightning had wiped out the band of the Black Brotherhood, all excepting Black Bill, who had been spared, with orders to be no more seen in the region of Golden Gulch.

Cheer after cheer went up for Red Lightning and the doctor, who then went with Faro Fred to the room of Fanchita Kingsley, and she told them her story.

In turn they made known to her that she was a widow, and the tears rolled down her cheeks; but they were tears of joy.

For some time matters jogged along evenly after this, at Golden Gulch.

Red Lightning lived at the Gold Brick, and employed men to work his mine, to which he made daily excursions.

Upon these rides he seldom went alone, for Ruby Roland was often his companion, and sometimes they had company, when Faro Fred and Fanchita Kingsley—with whom Ruby had shared her wardrobe until she could get her own from the States—went along.

At last Golden Gulch had a cause of excitement again, for Faro Fred had sold out his Temple, turned miner, having purchased a half-interest in "The Elgin" with Horace Hammond, and become a gentleman of fortune.

Upon this came the news that there was to be a double wedding at the Golden Brick.

This rumor was also true, for one night the "new parson" at Golden Gulch was called upon to marry two couples, the contracting parties being Mr. Horace Hale Hammond and Miss Ruby Roland, and Mr. Frederick Fairbanks and Miss Fanchita Kingsley.

Colonel Roland gave his daughter away to her handsome husband, who now wore no gloves, and Dr. Frank Powell did a like duty for Fanchita Kingsley, while all the miners of "The Elgin" and "The Bonanza" stood up in their Sunday clothes as "best men" on the festive occasion, and Tempest Tom, fully recovered, and Lanky were present in new suits of buckskin, but did not cast in shadow Monk Harris in his full rig, and who got gloriously drunk to celebrate the wedding, an example which he set and that was religiously followed by scores of others, who drank bumpers to "ther health, happiness an' sicc o' Red Lightnin' an' Faro Fred an' thar bootiful ledies."

THE END.

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